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# AVATAR, CYBORG, ICEVORG: SIMULACRA'S SCION

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# AVATAR, CYBORG, ICEVORG: SIMULACRA'S SCION

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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For You

Ave, Scientia, morituri te salutant

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## Abstract

Reality is nevermore. Reality, or our state of being, has always been a site of contestation. Avatars are representations of us; they are digital beings emerging from our minds to populate and add a new layer of simulation to our conception of reality. Avatars now penetrate our consciousness and demand our attention. They need us, but not as much as we need them. Avatars are digital containers of identity operated by us, their initial puppeteers. They are the key cultural constituents of what French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1994) conceptualized as the hyperreal. I propose a theoretical framework that describes how avatars incorporate media as an inherent part of their nature and find a hosting body in cyborgs to navigate and spawn in media. I propose the birth of a new scion that combines avatar, medium and cyborg into a conceptual being that I call "ICEVORG." The ICEVORG expands beyond representation into the actual physical world by means of media transgression—more specifically, by the use of the Strange Loop (Hosftadter, 1980, p. 10), as an effective soil to thrive and interrogate our ideas of reality by means of iteration, expansion, fragmentation and naturalization.

The development of the framework explains how the conceptual creature spawns in the interstices between fiction and reality. The ICEVORG transgresses boundaries to reach and transcend the concepts of the avatar and cyborg in order to generate meaning and pursue relevance in contemporary society. Through qualitative analysis of two selected case studies I will introduce evidence of ICEVORGS and how they nurture the discourse

on the development of identity in cyberspace by becoming agents of change. Finally, in order to construct my argument, I employ autoethnography, a research methodology that allows for a more personal voice to be included as part of the research process. Autoethnography helps me explore and develop the notion of the ICEVORG in the more appropriate context of hybrid media.

**Proem**

It was the end of the spring term in 2001. Emilio, my first born, was five months old. He and his mom were arriving from a trip to Los Angeles, and I picked them up at the Richmond International Airport. After not having slept for three consecutive days driving to the airport was an unforgettable adventure. I was attempting to write my first thesis project to present to my academic adviser. I intended to write a "new" theory of design in the interval of a few days, and I discovered, out of exhaustion and frustration, that failure was imminent. Nonetheless, I kept trying. One book just led to another book, which pushed me into the dark and cold abyss of failure. My family members were expected to arrive at midnight, and Red Bull was not an option in 2001, just dark, heavy coffee. So, I drank enough of it to wake up half of the East Coast. I drove in a surreal state. I think that moment must have been close to what descriptions of a drug-induced altered state of mind must feel like. I drove smoothly on the black pavement with no music or any other sound beyond what the environments around me provided. I was not blinking much, and my pupils were dilated—that I remember. I arrived at the airport and met them with a huge smile and sign that I printed on white paper. The sign bore a red heart with the outline of a man extending his arms to greet his people.

We walked to the car and I explained my sleep deprivation to my wife, so she decided to drive. I sat down in the back seat behind the driver and placed my son's car seat by my side to the right. I covered it with a blanket so the headlights of approaching cars wouldn't wake him up. I must have fallen sleep that very instant. Sometime later, I woke up on a hospital bed and my previous reality had vanished.

Upon my return to what could be described as ¨normal¨life I noticed that my way of thinking was different yet I could not explain how or why. It was not until I had a professional clinical psychologist test my brain and diagnose it with a condition known as Attention-deficit Hyperactivity Disorder that I found out I could become a normal person by turning myself into a conceptual cyborg. It entailed the ingestion of drugs that I conceptualized as micro-computers altering my natural state of being to improve it. To better understand what ADHD is here is a brief explanation: Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, refers to a behavioral condition that has been firmly established as a psychiatric disorder that meets the criteria for the validation of psychiatric diagnoses as outlined by Robins and Guze (1970). The first published case reports of children exhibiting ADHD-like difficulties appeared in the mid-1800s. Not until the turn of the century, however, was any attempt made to view such problems scientifically [What problems? You need to describe in the first sentence what it is.]. In what is often credited as the first of such attempts, Still (1902) described a group of children whose behavior was characterized by symptoms of inattention and overactivity, which began in early childhood, persisted over time, and deviated significantly from expectations for peers of the same age (Anastopoulous & Shelton, 2001).

In spite of the great amount of resources and attention given to the condition, it continues to be considered highly controversial, and is questioned by journalists, the media, politicians, and other interest groups (Buitelaar, 2008). The condition is, however,

accepted as such by the government and its education system. Section 504[1] represents federal recognition of ADHD as a condition. Its intent is to provide protection for individuals against discrimination by classifying them as persons with disabilities. Even though the term "disability" is itself constantly under the critical observation of policymakers and the general public, it is accepted as a universal means for signifying "difference."

**Figure 1:** Evidence. Composition of digital images captured after the accident to show the level of impact that the car, and my head, suffered. Photographs by Vladimir del Rosario.

[1] Section 504 is federal civil rights law under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It provides protection against discrimination for individuals with disabilities. Students in school settings fall under the civil rights protection of Section 504.

When I woke up at the hospital, I found out what had happened. Luli, my (now) ex-wife, was driving home and I fell asleep in the back seat, having forgotten to remove the mediating interface between my eyes and the physical world, better known as "glasses." As soon as she joined I-94, we were struck by another car from behind. According to the police report, the uninsured driver of that car was travelling at 160 miles per hour. The impact was direct and we were spun off the highway. The car was totaled (Figure 1), but remarkably neither Luli nor Emilio sustained major injuries. I was not that lucky. The impact broke the back seat, and I hit the front seat with my face. My glasses shattered and broke into my forehead with such force that they punctured a hole in the left side of my skull, right above the eye. Innumerable scenarios could have developed in a much more sinister way than what occurred. I could have lost my eye, or I could have opened a door into a different dimension, that of ADHD, a point of no return. I must say that I had ADD before the accident, however it went unnoticed until the accident somehow turned to volume of it up. That is my personal theory based on my findings on how the condition comes to be according to experts in the field. They claim that recent studies have focused on abnormal brain anatomy as a cause of ADHD. Through the use of brain imaging technology, including functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), and single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), certain regions of the brain have been identified as different in patients with ADHD. The fMRI is a special type of MRI that allows for visualization of the structure of the brain and can

measure the activity of the different areas of the brain in response to certain activities. The advantage of this type of scan is that it does not require an injection of dye into the blood stream to visualize activity levels. Instead, it measures the differences in oxygen use in the various areas of the brain.

The frontal lobes of the brain, composed of the prefrontal and frontal cortex, make up about one-third of the brain's surface. This is the region where higher intellectual functioning, or "executive functions," takes place. This region controls the skills that relate to planning, initiating, problem solving, inhibition, impulsivity, and understanding the behavior of others. The frontal lobes also help control voluntary body movements, speech, and, to some degree, mood. The prefrontal area of the frontal lobes is connected to other areas of the brain that are responsible for the control of the neurotransmitters dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin (Buttros, 2007; Shelton, 2001).

The causes of ADHD continue to be explored as a flood of both clinically diagnosed patients as well as self-identified patients add to the statistical data base. As of 2013, the main causes contributing to ADHD were thought to be: 1) pre- and perinatal influences, such as prematurity, low birth weight, pregnancy and birth complications, and mother's use of alcohol or tobacco during pregnancy; 2) parental and family factors such as critical expressed emotion versus expressed warmth, inconsistent parenting, parental divorce, family conflict and early institutional rearing; and 3) acquired neurobiological risks, such as closed head trauma and exposure to lead (Buitelaar, 2013).

I remember my very last conversation with a doctor at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center prior to my official discharge. He said to me: "They did a great

job with the scar. You seem to be doing fine. We don't know what's going to happen to you; only time will tell." And it did, very clearly and very soon. The direct hit to my frontal skull, its fracture, and the swelling of the frontal lobe that followed resulted in what I call my "squirrel brain." From that moment on, my life changed. I began to notice a great deal of additional energy, and that was a good byproduct of the event, I must say. However, restlessness followed suit and with it difficulty in focusing, reading, concentrating, and seeing life with the same perspective that I once had before the accident. Even though the world kept spinning on its axis, my perception of it did not. I became a replica of myself, an avatar, and a fragmented reflection of whom I had been. Good introduction of the figure of the avatar. Perhaps I travelled through the rabbit hole or walked into the other side of the mirror; maybe I switched dimensions. In any case, I knew then that I needed to learn more about this change

Most people will, during their lifetime, exhibit some –if not all—of the symptoms associated with ADHD. The list of symptoms is extensive and continues to be revised in light of new research. The attention-related impairments associated with ADHD affect different people in different ways. Here are some that relate to the argument I am attempting to construct:

1. Losing a train of thought, which is irritating as it breaks the flow of conversation.
2. Sustaining a conversation proves difficult when too much noise is around.
3. Sustaining an in-depth conversation about a single topic proves difficult. (Other thoughts or ideas come flooding into the mind that cannot be avoided.)

4. Daydreaming or a wandering mind occurs with the slightest stimulation, especially when reading long texts that require a higher level of engagement.
5. Starting lots of tasks but never finishing them.
6. Getting distracted and pulled into doing something else that "promises" to be either more stimulating or incredibly interesting.
7. Regarding time as moving either too slowly or too fast.
8. Engaging in procrastination or false business.

Restlessness is one of the core symptoms of ADHD, and it may prevent individuals from relaxing and/or achieving adequate sleep. In fact, people with ADHD have been shown to exhibit higher levels of nocturnal activity. However, this increase in nocturnal activity has not been shown to affect sleep continuity in a significant way. In other words, ADHD does not cause individuals afflicted with it to wake up from a sleeping state. Nevertheless, adults with ADHD commonly report experiencing difficulties with ceaseless mental activity, and this problem may well persist into the night and prevent them from sleeping (Young & Bramham, 2007).

Fourteen years have gone by since I had the accident. Ever since, I have been working closely with college students and have learned to recognize behaviors that are not only aligned with what the scholarly literature on ADHD describes, but with my very own experiences. I have tried to learn about the condition and find ways to cope with it in order to create a balance between a regular/normal life and the independence that my brain simulates. I have also tried to normalize my life using prescribed drugs. There are two

primary stimulants that are used in the treatment of ADHD: amphetamines (Dexedrine, Dextrostat, Adderall, and Adderall XR) and methylphenidate (Ritalin, Ritalin LA, Concerta, Metadate ER, Metadate CD, Focalin, Focalin XR, Methylin, and Daytrana). There is no standard dose that is effective for all individuals. All of these medications are classified as Schedule II medications by the FDA, which means that they present the potential for abuse. These rapid-acting medications can produce a change in behavior 30 to 45 minutes after oral ingestion. The short-acting preparations, on the other hand, reach maximum effectiveness within two to four hours, with the useful effects wearing off within three to six hours. The FDA recently approved the use of a transdermal patch of methylphenidate for the treatment of ADHD, though the patch is only effective for 11 to 12 hours (Daytrana, 2006). At present, the transdermal patch is the only non-oral medication available for the treatment of this disorder (Buttross, 2007). I have experimented with Ritalin and Adderall only in different dosages, and only under the supervision of my physician. Results in my case had varied, but for the most part, these medications have helped me deconstruct reality and understand how external chemical stimulation is capable of altering the identity, even the ontological status of a person. In other words, my very own self becomes an avatar when I my consciousness is altered by the effects of said drugs. When I take Ritalin I enter a parallel reality that not only allows me to experience reality in a different way but also influences my perception and allows my artwork to become more fruitful as it is expressed in the work that I have produced over the last 14 years.

In my experience, one of the most—if not the most—complicated aspects of dealing with ADHD has been producing extensive structured written documents. I have struggled every step of the way. I struggled when I wrote my undergraduate thesis to become a designer; I struggled with completing my thesis to obtain my MFA in Design and Visual Communication; and I have struggled every time I have had to write a paper during my doctoral program. Having to confront the multi-headed monster called "dissertation," I found myself lost, completely lost, and if I may add, defeated, and depressed. I could not find a way around writing a document to prove that I am capable of doctoral research. Just when I was ready to give up, I found a possible salvation.

What is a doctoral dissertation after all? As a doctoral candidate engaged in the production of said document, I could argue that a doctoral dissertation is nothing more than a critical and systematic observation of a tiny piece of the body of knowledge—any tiny piece of any body of accepted knowledge. This observation is meant to contrast the thoughts and ideas of the aspiring scholar with those who came before him or her in an attempt to contribute a new insight to a given field. A dissertation is, undeniably so, traditionally delivered as a body of text organized in a very specific and rigorous form. As it is described in an article entitled "Faculty Perceptions of the Doctoral Education," "Quite apart from the specific characteristics of the doctoral dissertation as a process and document itself, the dissertation also can be viewed as reflecting much of our academic and intellectual culture. Most obviously, the dissertation reflects the capabilities of the author – the training received, the technical skills and the analytical and writing abilities developed" (Isaac, Quinlan, & Walker, 1992, p. 242). The dissertation is undoubtedly

meant to demonstrate the capabilities of the author, the training received, the technical skills acquired, and the analytical writing abilities developed. However, as Harrison points out the dissertation also has informal, emotional, and historical importance that extends beyond the document to the construction of the identity of the candidate and her or his future professional life (Harrison, 2009).

One of the most significant factors determining what constitutes a doctoral dissertation lies in its goal: to make a significant contribution to the field. What qualifies as a contribution to knowledge in the field is where the most differences among disciplines appear. One could argue though, that a decisive factor in defining "contribution" entails assisting in the evolution of the cultural production within the program itself. It has been suggested that other factors beyond reason, argument, and evidence have significant influence on the direction of the research and its final outcome (Hull, 1988).

According to Isaac, Quinlan, and Walker (1992), the experience gained in the production of the dissertation is crucial to develop a successful breadth of knowledge, and to achieve a higher degree of originality. Following these reflections, I decided to venture into the production of a dissertation document that would allow me to employ an alternative format more conducive to my wandering ADHD brain. Such a format would allow me to insert my idiosyncratic voice as an artist, a designer, and an educator, and by the way, as a non-native it would also challenge the English language construction demanded by traditional documentation at the doctoral level. Good strategy, good argument. In other words, I needed to find a format that could mediate between my inherent need to fight against the structure of any system while preserving the system to

avoid its destruction, That is I want to be a rebel within the constraints of the system itself and I think I can achieve it through my work without braking any rules. I think I found such a format in what contemporary scholars have called autoethnography.

Autoethnography is an intriguing qualitative method only given minimal acceptance for the time being. Emerging from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned and alternative ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated, this method of scholarly inquiry offers a way to give voice to personal experience as a means for advancing broader understanding. It begins with a personal story and intertwines with more traditional forms of scholarly narrative as need be to advance the construction of ICEVORG as a conceptual being. The characters described in the stories argue in favor of the research questions presented by the author, and ultimately of the construction of knowledge. They reveal the ways in which combined stories can both create reality and be portals to greater understanding in the humanities (Wall, 2008).

I completed my doctoral coursework in 2010. Life then took me into a completely unexpected path that helped me grow not only as a person, but, more importantly, as an art educator and professional artist. I had the opportunity to visit Rome, where I hugged trees that had witnessed Roman armies conquer and be defeated; I met the *David*, and the *David* in Florence, where I also experienced a sublime viewing of Damien Hirst's one-hundred-million-dollar work of art entitled *For the Love of God*. As a South American from the highlands of the Inca peoples I was particularly touched when I saw the golden ceilings made with the first gold brought from America, and saw right before my eyes, the thick

glass separating Michelangelo's *Pietà* from myself. I slept in the very same town where Martin Luther changed the world with his ideas. I fell in love with Berlin, and adopted Paris as my home (at least in my dreams). So, I wondered how to discard all of that phenomenological experience when the ultimate goal of my dissertation is to demonstrate that such reality is no longer accessible to us. How could I not include my thoughts and experiences coming face-to-face with the *Mona Lisa*? Autoethnography showed me a valid way to express myself without disrupting—that much—the status quo of academia.

According to Sarah Wall (2006), producing an autoethnography is a challenging task, but it can lead to the creation of a credible text while preserving the personal and natural voice of the researcher. As with any other form of narrative, autoethnography can assume many variations and styles, yet it is a valid and rigorous form of inquiry. In her words:

> Autoethnographers tend to vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (the cultural link), and –graphy (the application of a research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, paraphrasing Reed-Danahay, 1997). This variable emphasis on the separate dimensions of autoethnography results in the production of manuscripts that differ significantly in tone, structure, and intent. It must also be noted that some authors who have pursued autobiographical inquiry have not referred to their written products as autoethnographies. (p.6)

Resolving to use autoethnography implies a process of identity construction that involves passing through portals of self-perception, which are a consequential product of the personal narratives that a doctoral candidate chooses to share. Stories are intertwined with

theoretical arguments, as well as with more traditional uses of scholarly methods for citing references. The autoethnographic process pushes the author to construct a metanarrative of the document while re-positioning views of self and value systems, particularly with respect to knowledge and what it means to be a knower (Harrison, 2009).

However, scholars who are experienced in using this relatively new way of constructing and delivering scholarship warn new colleagues about the potential emotional writing, lack of honesty with oneself about the motivations behind the research, and, above all, the potential failure to connect personal experience with theory. As autoethnography continues to emerge, define itself, and struggle for acceptance, it is important that those working with it reflect on the use of the method and share their experiences with their colleagues and peers (Harrison, 2009). From Harrison's (2009) perspective, the process of learning to construct one's identity through this particular method of inquiry suggests the need to negotiate spaces for new conceptions of knowledge worthy of academic consideration. Autoethnography, Harrison (2009) writes, "Is my account of learning to be a PhD graduate and therefore, or learning 'doctoralness' or that level of knowledge currently accepted as worthy of a doctorate will enable the 'back and forth gaze' inward towards the personal and outward to the social, marrying the private and the public realms" (p. 256).

Using autoethnography implies making a path into new and unstable territories, yet taming and cultivating nature in these territories. With the implementation of autoethnography, untamed nature is developed and refined for agriculture and nurturing plants. It is important to acknowledge and understand the work of individuals in different fields who choose to use the same academic format, and, together as a collective, reach a

consensus on the relevance of the knowledge derived from such formats. Necessarily, then, the sociocultural and interactional aspects of doctoral learning that occurs in the "stuck" moments are central to understanding the process of knowledge construction in our ever-changing world.

Autoethnography is specially appropriate for my project of excellence as a valid form of inquiry since this method is described as a practice that moves into the foreground "the multiple natures of selfhood and opens up new ways of writing about social life" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3). The method itself blurs discursive definitions and expands the possibilities for a counter-discourse on the construction of modern identity. Simultaneously, it questions the authenticity of the voice that tells the story; therefore, it problematizes the nature of self and allows self-reflection to gain a level of objectivity that will procure insights into the scholar's discipline. This method of inquiry is even more relevant today when the construction of identity has shifted dramatically so as to empower the individual through the use of electronic means of cultural production. This is especially true in the arts and design since these disciplines demand innovative formulations aimed at challenging the status quo.

From this particular method of inquiry, I plan to generate a level of discourse that amounts to "multiphrenia," which Rolling (2004), in interpreting Gergen's (1991) definition of "autoethnography," identifies as the increase of multilocality, plurality, and intertextuality in the postmodern era. In other words, multiphrenia describes the never-ending embeddedness of our own stories within those that seem to belong to others.

Rolling (2004) reflects on the reasons why we need to find venues for personal expression, arguing:

> Humans have always understood the need for unmitigated stories of the self; it is why we paint ourselves, sing ourselves, dramatize ourselves, glorify ourselves in marble and stone, write ourselves into histories and her-stories, dream ourselves in the night. (p.551)

Even though the body image is only a component of psychological self-knowledge, it is a major factor in constructing identity in the modern and postmodern era due to the endless repetition of images and their inter-textuality. In addition to my intention of becoming a Doctor of Philosophy in order to further my teaching career in higher education, I am above all a designer and an artist. I must add that I observe myself and construct myself as a combination of both disciplines, but my academic training is that of a designer.

I will elaborate on what I see as similarities and differences between being an educator and being a designer later on in this dissertation; yet, in a nutshell I must say, that the difference between the two is intentionality. Why is intentionality important and relevant for approaching my dissertation using autoethnography? It is important, if not crucial, because the combination of art and design processes turn a messy journey into an organized and polished final product. It is that final product, which, by its own virtue, is the silent container of a complex and multi-linear process.

Scholar Allan J Munro has worked on the subject of design and electronically emerging technologies at the post-doctoral level for more than 14 years. He has also worked as an ethnographer with a background in psychology. After his first post-doctoral

position at Oxford University's Computing Lab, he developed an interest in using ethnographic methods to "inform the design of new technologies, critique prototypes and scenarios for new technologies, and as a tool to inspire and challenge innovation" (Munro, n.d., para. 3)

In addressing the validity of autoethnography as a research method for designers, Munro (2011) explains that the process of design is "messy" and the final design emerges from the experience that the designer has with a great number of sources, stimuli, interactions, and conversations. Through these, the designer can understand the clients' needs and wants, which are important inasmuch as they provide elements crucial to the successful outcome of the process. In contrast to more traditional research with sources from printed texts on theory, tables of statistical data, and scholarly articles, Munro indicates that in his experience, working with scholars who do not fit in the disciplinary boundaries requires the work to be completed in collaboration to develop a common understanding of a problem. In Munro's words:

> Despite inner-group diversity a certain level of shared common understanding, and/or repeated interactions is needed to bind people together as a group… One of the central tenets of design (and creativity) is the push and pull of idiosyncrasy. However, the idiosyncratic is bound (or framed") by like-mindedness of designers and their practice. Designers share practice, share an understanding (or at least an acceptance of the necessity of validation and to a certain extent share the criteria for such validation. (Munro, 2011, p. 156)

Munro (2011) also argues that the creative process of design is embedded in the culture of self, the culture of design, and the culture of evaluation and assessment. He claims that autoethnography is a methodology for capturing and analyzing new knowledge, one that best fits the complexities brought to the discourse on knowledge from interdisciplinary practice:

> …As it [knowledge] emerges from the interplay between these three cultures in the practice of report writing emphasize the notion of a ―systematic investigation‖ leading to a solution of the problem. Thus a research report has to (a) demonstrate evidence of some form of systematic thinking, has to (b) present the findings of that systematic thinking and has to (c) argue the case from this for new knowledge. Autoethnography provides a system that is an effective research strategy for fulfilling these obligations, as it provides a strategy for evidence gathering and evidence interpretation that is embedded in the temporality of emergence as a critical design process. (Munro, 2011, p. 156)

On the other hand, Munro (2011) acknowledges that autoethnography is still debated within the field of design when it comes to defining what constitutes research. Some design practitioners give more emphasis to the final product itself, as opposed to other practitioners who suggest that documentation is a necessary form of establishing evidence to support the final product. All definitions agree, however, that new knowledge needs to be placed in a public arena in some way, shape, or form (usually a written form). Whether

that final documentation takes the shape of an electronic-only format or one that must exist in print as well continues to be a subject of debate (Munro, 2011).

As I designer, I agree for the most part with Munro's arguments, yet I prefer to keep a rather comfortable distance in order to attempt to preserve a certain level of illusory objectivity. However, I came to conclude that a more rigorous and traditional approach to delivering my doctoral work was simply not possible, not only due to the challenges pertaining to the language itself but, above all, because of my personal need for producing innovation through experimentation. I do see myself as an agent of change, and I have constructed my identity as a person, as well as a scholar and educator, around this notion. Over the past decade, I have been teaching professionally, in academia, and I have tried to push the idea of innovation as much as I have been allowed. I believe it is one of the main responsibilities of scholars to innovate educational practices, yet, paradoxically, I have observed that tenured scholars are the least inclined to do so. I will elaborate on these thoughts later, but I think it is important to stress the fact that what I seek as an artist, designer, and above all as an educator is to preserve the personal voice of students, not only as a form of resistance against the system but more importantly as a way to humanize the process of education. In my experience, when students are considered human rather than entities that flood universities to gain knowledge, true education takes place.

The ultimate goal of research is to assist in the construction of culture and cultural practices. According to Munro (2011), contrary to the culture of individuality, individuals are cultural agents. From the standpoint of anthropology and sociology, he suggests that

individuals shape cultural practices, and in return, cultural practices shape individuals, thus turning them into cultural agents:

> Sociology informs one that a person is the product of the interface between the individual, on the one side, and the environment, time and culture into which he or she is born, on the other. Furthermore, the individual is a product of his or her own unique attributes, preferences, abilities and proclivities, and contributes in his or her own way to the development of the environment and culture. Thus the individual shapes and is shaped by the environment. (Munro, 2011, p. 157)

It is then through the proposal of a narrative that resembles, in one way or another, the discourse of a diary or a journal, such as that of autoethnography, that I will capture and communicate the design and art-making processes sustaining my main argument: an account of the reality we experience on a daily basis, and how our identities are constructed and how those constructs – that are many -- can be evidenced by relevant artwork found in the world today. Since autoethnography is constructed with stories of events that can be visual, inspirational, theoretical, cognitive, comparative, or simply anecdotal, I expect these stories to provide core research moments that will procure a reflective strategy, which captures decision-making thoughts and reflections/insights as events unfold. Each "experience" lived becomes, therefore, an integral element to construct and support my project.

Based on the arguments presented in the development of my proem, I conclude that using autoethnography as the method of scholarly inquiry to structure my project to comply with the regulations of the MATX program, as expressed in its published list of

expected outcomes: “Students will demonstrate the ability to conduct independent research and produce new, specialized knowledge within the broad parameters of media, art and text,” and “Students will develop competence in interdisciplinary and disciplinary research methods and responsible conduct of research” (MATX, 2015, para. 1).

I am convinced that autoethnography meets the special criteria that my “restless” brain demands, which are the result of my ADHD. The scholarly argument that I now present should be analyzed and considered as a significant contribution to the field of interdisciplinary studies, and to the pedagogical philosophy proposed by the MATX program.

CHAPTER ONE

## Like Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants[2]

*"The appearance of the nonexistent as if it existed motivates the question as to the truth of art. By its form alone art promises what is not; it registers objectively, however refractedly, the claim that because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible."* -- Theodore Adorno[3]

In 1998, when I first arrived to the United States to obtain my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Design and Visual Communication, I remember feeling intrigued by what I thought then to be linear clouds drawn on the sky. I never saw anything like it before and could not understand why they were there. Quickly enough, my restless brain concluded that the government was spraying chemicals on the population to stimulate economic consumption, and I proceeded to tease my classmates with this theory. Obviously, my intention was to fool them, but my curiosity remained. It was not until a few years later that I heard about them again: this time as a robust conspiracy theory supported by 26 formal references in Wikipedia ("Chemtrail Conspiracy Theory," 2015). The article describes a theory of government control through the spraying of biological agents for purposes undisclosed to the general public. The article cites evidence from formal organizations such as the National Air and Space Administration (NASA), the

[2] The Metalogicon of John Salisbury. University of California Press. p. 167.
[3] Aesthetic Theory.1970

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Office of Atmospheric Programs (OAP) to discredit the conspiracy theory, thereby providing a rationale to the population who chooses to go beyond the hearsay. In other words, responding to a claim that commonsense deems as irrational opens a tiny door to the possibility that the story contains some truth. That small promise of truth was enticing enough for me to go a few layers deeper to find out more about the "truthness" within this truth. As I delved into research on this subject, I found out that according to Rossman (2001), what I referred to as "linear clouds" were actually "contrails" (Figure 2). They are the byproduct of cold jet engines climbing up the skies to reduce distances in a way that would had been impossible before technological development in air transportation. Stroud explains that the humid exhaust from a jet engine mixes with the atmosphere, which is at a much lower pressure and temperature than the jet exhaust. The water vapor contained in the jet exhaust condenses and may freeze. This mixing process forms a cloud very similar to the one our breath makes on a cold day. In Rossman words:

> Depending on a plane's altitude, and the temperature and humidity of the atmosphere, contrails may vary in their thickness, extent and duration. The nature and persistence of jet contrails can be used to predict the weather. A thin, short-lived contrail indicates low-humidity air at high altitude, a sign of fair weather, whereas a thick, long-lasting contrail reflects humid air at high altitudes and can be an early indicator of a storm. (Rossman, 2001, par. 3)

***Figure 2:*** *Contrails.* Digital capture of contrails as seen in the sky on any given day. Image by the author.

What I find fascinating is how fragile the construction of knowledge can be, and more to the point, how important the role of interpretation is in the construction of reality. Today, we can look up at the sky and see a sign with no referent (in this case, the contrails with no plane), and quickly conclude that they are not natural—that those "drawings" were made by an agent that is the product of a human process. One could even generate more creative connections between the sign that one sees in the sky and one or many conspiracy theories, ranging from total political control to aliens harvesting us for food. However, the point I want to make is that I have observed that reality is constructed through personal observation in conjunction with what the media feeds us to be "the truth," and that "truth" is accessible for analysis only when a third agent is present; in this case, the contrails

themselves represent this third agent. If planes left no contrails in the sky we, as scholars, could not push the boundaries of knowledge, for there would be no questions to pose, and no curiosity to feed.

Imagine the same situation happening in the year 1534. Contrails appear in the sky, but there is no possible explanation to establish a connection between the object that one sees in the sky—the plane—and its possible cause. Since there were no planes at the time, could contrails have existed? How would one attempt to provide a rational, let alone scholarly, explanation for the observed phenomenon? The answer is rather simple: intelligence. According to Campbell (1974), intelligence is the acquisition of new knowledge as theorized by the "chance-configuration theory," which states three core propositions:

> 1) The acquisition of new knowledge, the solution of novel problems, requires means of producing variation. 2) These heterogeneous variations are subjected to a consistent selection process that winnows out all those that exhibit adaptive utility, and 3) The variations that have been selected must be preserved and reproduced by some mechanism; without such retention, a successful variation cannot represent a permanent contribution to adaptive fitness. (p.170)

In other words, to be intelligent according to these three core principles is to have the capacity to acquire new knowledge that solves problems by establishing variations within the solution that adapt and transpose in order to solve other problems by means of some mechanism that allows reproduction and archiving. This particular theory is one of many

theories that attempt to define what intelligence is, a subject of scholarly analysis which continues to receive academic interest (Eysenck, 1993).

Lucas Cranach der Ältere (1472 – 1553) was a German Renaissance painter and printmaker appointed as the Electors of Saxony court painter for the majority of his career. He was also a close friend of Protestant reformer Martin Luther. In 1534 in Wittenberg, Germany, he created a woodcut allegory to illustrate Luther's Bible. The title of the piece is *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Figure 3).

***Figure 3:*** Workshop of Lucas Cranach. *Luther: Bible Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1534. University of California, San Diego, California. *ARTstor Slide Gallery*. Web. 02 Oct. 2013.

In his piece, Cranach uses his intelligence to construct a scene that depicts four horses standing on clouds. The first horse, to the left, gestures action to signify the initiation of the Apocalypse. The two horses right behind the first are simply standing, waiting to be called to action, while the fourth stands, head down, observing the people it stands atop. This particular horse is ridden by no other than the Death himself, in a gesture that implies, one could argue, deep relaxation, even happiness. Above all, an angel oversees the scene, yet his gaze is directed above him; he is waiting as well, to receive a final order that will release the full power of final destruction. The annihilation of the human race as we know it is commanded by no other than the Almighty Himself.

The reason why I bring this particular image to the discourse is to point out that Luther's Bible represented a very important paradigm shift in that it changed the way knowledge was constructed and delivered from a production of a reduced number of units containing handwritten information to a mass produced original prints. I am not attempting to suggest that Luther's Bible was the first text to do so, not at all. What I am suggesting is that the medium he chose, in tandem with the technology of reproduction and distribution, worked in favor of his intention and thus procured a radical change in how reality was perceived. The relationship between image and text, combined with the medium chosen to bring them together, made the difference in terms of the number of people reached with a new proposed form for perceiving reality. Luther's Bible brought that change, and from a secular point of view, one of the most important contributions of the release of this document was the radical increase in literacy. One may argue that Luther's Bible as a whole was meant to reach a large audience; the images you describe added to the

accessibility of the Bible, its impact on a common and diverse audience. According to Haile (1976), Luther's sensational dispute, which would end in a new order within the known religions, an order that continues to this day, was crucial in the popularization of literacy. The common man, always curious, wanted to know what the fuss was all about, Haile indicates. To have access to a medium that contained what (at the time) was undeniably perceived as "knowledge" became a strong motive for learning how to read. The psychological power of the printed word continued to transform the way reality was constructed, and it provided the masses access to a new world and a parallel universe. Such a universe was only accessible through the mediation of the Church and the images that constructed the universe as contained and controlled within their walls—in the form of paintings and artwork, that is. The release of a new medium into the world meant the further development of the world of literature as well. Haile (1976) explains:

> …[E]ssential to the stunning popular success of the Luther Bible was his theory of literature, which for the first time enabled the people to understand these works from ancient Hebrew as related intimately to their own lives. […]To appreciate the broad popular appeal of Luther the interpreter, it may help if we first observe his work as a popular artist. Many German Humanists were influenced by the aristocratic Italian Renaissance with its visions of clear and balanced form, of rationality and propriety; but northern Europe would eventually come to express its own character in the profusions of Rabelais, Fischart, and Shakespeare with their endless combinations and crass juxtapositions. (p. 818)

Yet, what I would like to emphasize in the development of my own scholarly work is the importance of a new medium combining text and image for the general population, and more specifically for its construction of knowledge. Having access to the "Word of God" was simply impossible without mediation before Luther's Bible. To walk into a church was equivalent, I will argue later on, to what virtual reality proposes today. A whole different phenomenological approach to the construction of knowledge began to emerge, yet to see an image such as *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in a medium that was constructed to signify the word of God was meant to be an experience that would consequently change the viewer's behavior. It was intended to make the invisible visible while using "knowledge" as the agent that would determine the structures of power in the society of those times. The relationship between power and knowledge, and how the former is used to control and define the latter, takes place when authorities claim it as "scientific knowledge." Foucault (1988), for instance, shows how "madness" was used to categorize and stigmatize not just the mentally ill but the poor, the sick, the homeless, and anybody who would venture to challenge the status quo (as cited in Stokes, 2004).

In spite of the development of science, and the radical change that technology has brought into our lives over the last two hundred years, I would argue that not much has changed in terms of how we relate images and texts to what we believe to be knowledge.

Consider, for instance, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* as an informational device, not as allegory, myth, art, or creative writing. Then, project yourself back to those times when, after reading that particular passage of the Bible, perceived as the direct word of God, you would walk out and look above expecting to find the horsemen coming. Is it

any different than today with our expectations of a UFO launching a massive attack, resulting in our own apocalypse? Let me illustrate by showing an image, a chart, from a 1943 catalog *How to Identity Warplanes* (Figure 4).

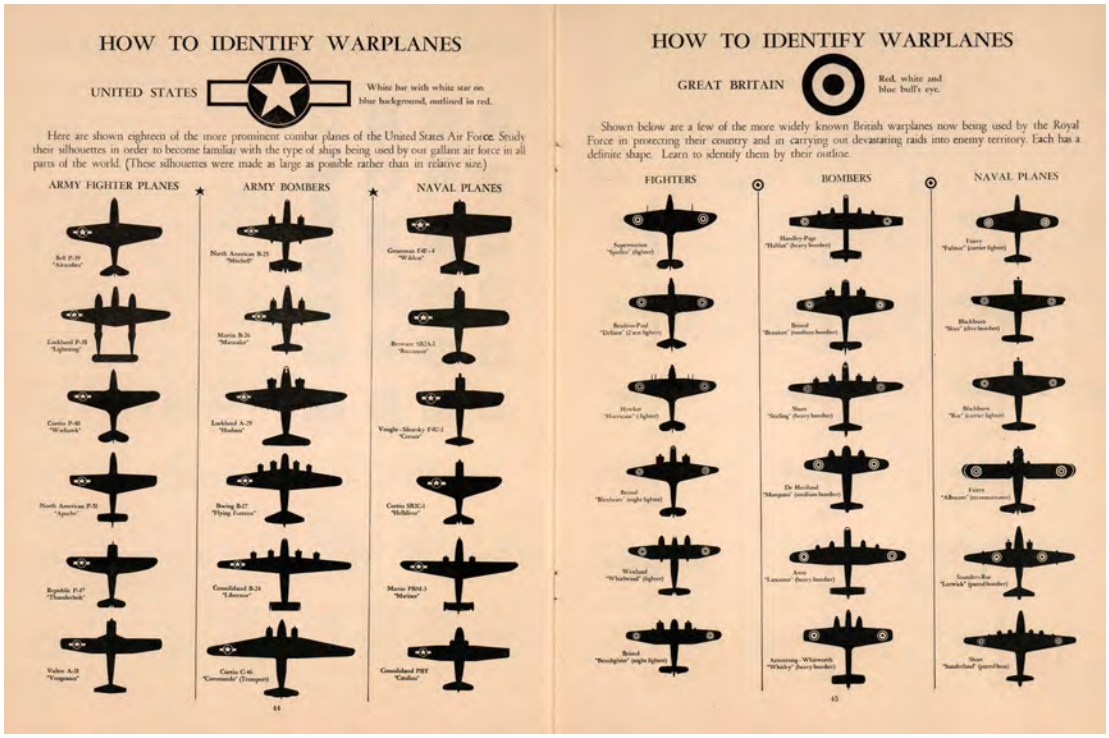


***Figure 4:*** Clement Co., J. W. "How to Identify Warplanes." Chart. *Atlas of the World at War*. Ed. Division Matthews-Northrup. Cleveland and New York: World, 1943. 44-45. Ser. 39. *David Rumsey Historical Map Collection*. Web. 17 Oct. 2013. <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.

This image, I argue, is conceptually equivalent to Cranach's woodcut. Both images were conceived and designed to produce the same effect in the viewer: to provide a map of elements to recognize in the sky, or "The Heavens," if I may add. In the first case, the Church is the agent who provides the rules of engagement with the world, which is to prepare us, humans, for what will come. In the second case, the warplane chart, the images in combination with the text serve the same purpose, which is to get as ready as we can for

what will fly above our heads, to better recognize the elements appearing in the sky and act in accordance with the norms established by the powers that be. What can be observed is that which changes between the two images presented for analysis, the level of abstraction used to render the elements, as well as the medium itself. What I am suggesting does not venture beyond a rather simple observation, but my intention is to demonstrate that not much has changed in spite of the development of technology. Reality continues to be a construct dependent upon the use of mediating agents. For the successful construction of these media, and for them to achieve their communicative goals, they are meant to become invisible to our senses. In other words, reality is a phenomenological construct that depends on a medium, or many, to be able to present, construct, and deliver concepts, and ultimately to deliver meaning.

In addition, my narrative will demonstrate that said relationship between media has conjured a reality, or the perception of one, that is based on the moment when reality is represented and confined to a medium other than physical reality itself. It is important to note that I am strongly emphasizing the relationship between image and text, considering both, to a certain extent, two visual representations of reality. The first one —image— is a two-dimensional representation of objects existing in reality, and the second one —text— is a visual representation of sounds (spoken language) expressed graphically. This is important because what I will be discussing throughout my dissertation pertains to images, even when those images correspond to three-dimensional physical objects positioned in space and time. With that purpose in mind, I must add that to understand what an image *is* remains of great importance to my study. I will be referring consistently to the scholarly

work of W. J. Mitchell (2005), one of the leading scholars in media theory and visual culture today. Mitchell is a professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago whose scholarship is focused on the theorization of image. He suggests that images are living creatures (Mitchell, 2005). That conception alone has incited my curiosity since I believe it has a direct correlation to my scholarship. According to Mitchell, the definition of an image has varied as history has evolved, yet what has remained a common denominator across definitions is the role images play in the construction of power. On the other hand, to define images today is a task somewhat more complex than before, considering the images' contemporary mechanic and electronic reproducibly (Benjamin, 1935; Davidson, 2009; Mitchell, 1984; 2003). Asking what images are today entails a more complex undertaking that involves not only the image and its ontology, but also how the image has permeated different media to produce a certain effect, and how media have reflected the image back to us.

Moreover, images come from the world of semiotics, a discipline that studies the signification of signs and the complexities involved in understanding them as a system of meaning. To complicate matters, as Mitchell (1984) explains, language and image are no longer what they promised to be. Mitchell writes that both are "Transparent media through which reality may be represented to the understanding" that "have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison houses which lock the understanding away from the world" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 8). Put differently, it is the role of scholars to mediate between the locked meanings and the public by liberating meaning through analytical argumentation. As scholars begin to unlock layers of meaning, new layers of meaning

emerge to reveal insights that were not visible before. For example, my linear clouds were mere symbols that reflected my ignorance until I chose to find out the meaning they carried inside. Images then, I would argue, are containers of meaning—pregnant vessels navigating through oceans of information waiting to be seen, paid attention to, found. For Mitchell (1984), what images want is to exist, to be, to become relevant in the construction of culture, perhaps even to continue on through endless reproduction and dissemination. Mitchell's argument that images "want to be" could be found in any fossil displayed in a museum of natural history exemplifying an animal trapped in between rocks and thus transcending its own reality to be "documented" for posterity. Nature has found a way to preserve a form through time in what could be argued to represent her playing the role of an historian and documentarian.

Attempting to personify nature as an entity with librarian desires may be farfetched, yet when we begin to analyze the involvement of humanity in the process of image construction, the story becomes much more interesting. An early medium used to convey messages is found in petroglyphs and cave paintings. One site that is host to such early media is the now-celebrated Altamira cave in Cantabria, Spain (Cartailhac, 1902). Long ago, there were humans with the capacity, and the need, to use images to construct and convey meaning, employing paint (no less)—one of the highest-valued media in art, even today. The images that we see from this particular category usually represent animals and humans, in scenes that we can recognize and identify. However, they are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what has been found and cataloged. According to Conkey (1997),

only a small group of these images "make sense" to us; others will remain locked for a period of time until scholars unlock their meanings:

> Many appear to be animals or parts thereof, but are 'unfinished' to our eyes. Other markings abound: geometric shapes, some repeated in only certain cave sites; negative hand prints; other shapes often interpreted as human body parts (e.g., a so-called phallus or a vulva); dots; short lines; finger markings in soft clay surfaces or on the floors of caves and shelters. (p. 51)

Our understanding today of these images is that they were made (and some rejuvenated or touched up over time) over a period as long as 25,000 years, between about 34,000 to 11,000 years ago. Images from the Grotte Chauvet (in the Ardèche region of France, which dates images as beginning about 34,000 years ago) are separated in time (by about 17,000 years) from the newer, 17,000-year-old images at Lascaux. Our forensic knowledge of these images have increased substantially over the past few decades. We have identified both different and repetitive "recipes" (including binders and extenders) for the colors used (Clottes, 1993); stone implements used for engraving or for processing the pigments have been found with characteristic use/wear patterns; even some traces of scaffolding or rope have been documented (Conkey, 2010; Leroi-Gourhan & Allain, 1979).

The point I am trying to make is that constructing images to reflect and leave a mark of our presence in this reality is not a new phenomenon, but rather one that has been an integral part of being human. The other aspect I want to stress is that any expression of meaning, regardless of the message, requires a medium to be, to exist. To call cave paintings "art" may also be too much of a stretch. For Davis (1985), cave paintings do not

warrant particular attention because they are artistic and somewhat more developed, but because they present unique qualities that may demonstrate that humans were using creativity in the early stages of evolution. Considering the use of images as a means to reinforce certain ideologies of human nature, and the creativity used to manufacture them, entails accepting that our level of abstract thinking was developed to the point of enabling symbolic value to become part of our understanding of the world, perhaps as long as 30,000 years ago. In fact, some have suggested the birth of visual culture declares the initiation of abstract thinking capabilities in early humans (Lewis-Williams, 2002).

Moving from cave painting to computer-generated graphics may be a a giant leap, yet it is necessary to show that pertinent issues in image scholarship continue to engage the evolution of humanity in relation to that of media. Images reflect who we are as individuals as well as a collective (Mitchell, 2004). When we reduce the scope of observation from the collective to the individual, one could argue that images, or the construction of images, are always representations of the self. Early scholars and early researchers of the 20th century, Conkey (1997) argues, struggled to understand what cave painting evince. Religion? Magic? Abstract thinking? We are, according to Conkey, like cave painters: "aesthetic, cognitively sophisticated, attentive to meaning-making and symbolism. We, like the cave painters, attempt to manipulate people and the world around us, and develop coping mechanisms and instruments of social action" (p. 280). We "shake with a cave man" in as much as we are able to confirm that we share the same modernity with them, as exemplified in the shared power to make images imbued with meaning (Haltunnen, 2009). The question, then, is which way does the mirror work and who is

looking at whom? Berger (2002), a well-known commentator of contemporary visual culture, challenges our intention to learn more when he says:

> Perhaps we will have to be content with intuiting that they came here [into the caves] to experience, and to carry away with them in memory, special moments of living a perfect balance between danger and survival, fear and a sense of protection. Can one hope for more at any time? (p. 18)

What I am arguing is that human-made images will always go beyond themselves since their intention is to communicate meaning. They are containers of meaning that allow us to reflect on ourselves and our evolution throughout history, yet they only provide us with clues, hints, to who we are—never complete and fixed narratives in time and space. Good argument.

To attempt an understanding the concept of the self from the perspective of image construction and its analysis is to venture in a serious and complex journey. Could there be a more profound philosophical inquiry in human history than inquiry into the self? Said inquiry represents a fundamental quest that has been revisited for millennia, most likely by every philosopher in one way or another. This journey has never found a definite answer, nor an absolute truth. As times have changed, expedited by the development of advanced technologies of communication, so has our understanding of how reality is defined, constructed, and experienced. Informed by common sense, one could argue that the need to know more about humanity has evolved over time as well and it has become only more complex.

Moreover, words like *body*, *soul*, *consciousness*, and *self*, words that we currently use to describe the constituents of the individual, have evolved in their definitions over time as well. Bodies have been the subject of attention for every discipline, from mathematics to computer science to art. All disciplines, nonetheless, have been informed and supported by philosophy in their search for a universal truth about not only the mechanisms that govern our bodies and our minds, but especially about how the components of the individual relate to one another to form a holistic person. When we travel back in time through the text, we can find that Aristotle (384BC- 322BC) was already theorizing about the nature of the self expressed as awareness, as well as about the interest to understand complexities. He provides in *Methaphysics* a description of the complex nature of the indivisible parts comprising a thing or a human:

> Are we then to say that the All is composed of indivisible substances? Some thinkers did, in point of fact, give way to both arguments. To the argument that all things are one if being means one thing, they conceded that not-being is; to that from bisection, they yielded by positing atomic magnitudes. But obviously it is not true that if being means one thing, and cannot at the same time mean the contradictory of this, there will be nothing which is not, for even if what is not cannot be without qualification, there is no reason why it should not be a particular not-being. To say that all things will be one, if there is nothing besides Being itself, is absurd. For who understands 'being itself' to be anything but a particular substance? But if this is so, there is nothing to prevent there being many beings, as

has been said. It is, then, clearly impossible for Being to be one in this sense. (Aristotle, 187a, pp. 7-9)

I am somewhat resistant when it comes to accepting Greek philosophers as a point of departure for understanding the way our thinking has evolved over the last 2000 years. But when I read their words, or what we trust to be their words, and feel challenged by their thoughts, and agree that they continue to apply to the times we live in now, I find myself amazed. It is shocking that 2000 years ago intellectuals were dealing with issues of how to define what a human is made of and the conceptual split between mind and body. As early as 2000 years ago, humans were haunted by the perception of "something" of a non-physical nature being part of every one of us. As early as 2000 years ago, philosophers from all over the world were already analyzing, exploring, and transforming the way we understand the image of the self that is perceived by others and by our very own selves. Yet, what I find to be even more interesting is that we still do not have a definite answer to the question about the constitution of the self.

When I use the term "technology," I am also referring to written languages as a means to represent verbal communication, following the path of French philosopher Jacques Derrida who contributed to the world his analysis on language and semiotics. As technology continues to evolve, the capacity of the human brain also improves to accommodate new forms of presentation and representation. Derrida's reflections will be incorporated throughout my dissertation to help structure my own arguments about the construction of reality as it is mediated by current technologies of communication. My project analyzes the projected and constructed image of the self—the way they come into

being, to exist, and ultimately to interact with us in a conscious and non-conscious fashion. I will also describe the many reasons why we, as humans, struggle to explain ourselves through technology. In a way, this project is about a focus on the mirror, where we find the reflection of our physical selves. The mirror is, when understood as a physical object, subject to phenomenological inquiry and metaphorical interpretation. When we as scholars enter a realm of analysis and contemplation, we can observe ourselves reinterpreting the surface of the mirror (media) where we reflect on as humanity at large.

Over the last tweny years or so, I have experienced a recurring thought that I use frequently during my teaching, and it goes like this: Imagine for a second what a world without the phenomenon of physical reflection would be like. Everything is the same; all life is as it is today, but there is no reflection. I invite my students to ponder about how this imaginary reality would change them—how in not having access to our own image we would have to rely on artistic interpretations to see ourselves. Could we exist in the way we do if we did not have access to the way we look? Could we sustain a certain degree of peace of mind over the anxiety generated by not having access to our reflected image? What would be the consequences of said reality? For McLuhan (1964), searching for our image in the mirror creates, over time, what he describes as "Narcissus Narcosis," or the reconceptualization of the mirror as a servomechanism that becomes an extension of our body. This medium, however, numbs us, and becomes a closed system that enslaves by preventing us access back to our selves. McLuhan's term is thus negative, a form of "death" of the body. McLuhan continues by saying that to accept the reflected image is not

a mere phenomenon but an undeniable part of ourselves, an "amputation" of the essence of our consciousness that pushes us to assimilate the reflection as an extension of our bodies.

I will focus on these questions as my dissertation proceeds. To conclude my introduction, I have observed that reflection in the real physical world where we experience our bodies is constant and reliable. However, the phenomenon itself, reflection, always depends on a medium "to be." In other words, even the illusory nature of the image requires a medium to exist. Whether that medium is the surface of water, the screen of a cell phone, or even our own consciousness is irrelevant. What matters is the acknowledgement that the medium (or media) is always there, and it is possible to access it by virtue of its ontological nature.

However, when the surface or the medium where the image reflects—both physically and metaphorically—changes, so does reality and the way we construct it. For Benjamin (1936), the mode of human perception changes over time, and with it, he argues, humanity's entire mode of existence. As he explains, "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception" (Jennings, 2008, p. 9). In this line from his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," written in Paris while in exile during the mid-1930s, Benjamin defines how the human sensorium adapts to new realities brought to the discourse of life by technology. Additionally, Benjamin conceptualizes a principle that I find to be most relevant to the development of what I will later theorize as a crucial constituent of what I define as ICEVORG. Benjamin describes the notion of "auratic" and "nonauratic" forms of art. The term "aura," which first appears in the 1929 essay "Little

History of Photography" and is then fully developed in his later works, refers to an invisible space which is part of a conceptual realm. He asks,

> What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be… [i]t rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction. And the reproduction, as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels, differs unmistakably from the image. The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking perception. (Benjamin, 1929, p. 43)

For Benjamin, a work of art may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based on the relationship it establishes with an observer, or if it possesses a certain sense of intimacy, even when the image itself stops being unique and becomes a reproduction or one of an endless number of reiterations. It creates, he explains, a psychological inapproachability between painting and spectator or between text and reader, a tension that is necessary for the "aura" to become the subject of phenomenological experience (Jennings, Doherty, & Levin, 2008). The "aura" of art is impossible to comprehend and know directly: it surrounds the work, giving it a special power of signification, but it cannot be perceived or translated into simple definitions.

What has changed, drastically, since Benjamin developed his theories, is the medium itself, which has made it possible to observe their validity and relevance. We are living in times when the mirroring image is no longer constrained by the rules of the physical world. Thanks to the development of technology, different forms of representations have emerged over the years. They have provided us with an array of never-experienced-before possibilities on electronic surfaces that can be adjusted and manipulated to construct variations of the images that permit us to perceive the world as an alternative construct being reflected back to us. More accurately put, what I find important about the new media where our current forms of identity are constructed and maintained is the nature of it. New media are liquid. The inherent ability that new media present adapts to emerging forms of expression and perception that are necessary to understand the notion of ICEVORG.

To summarize, what I have intended to present in my introduction by shifting gears from 1534 to the Second World War to today's conspiracy theories, is the fragile construction of knowledge. What I have learned over the years as a doctoral scholar in the making, as well as a professor of art and design, is to give credit to the power of personal experience above all other "media" that inform us about how to construct, criticize, and accept (or reject) what reality is. When it comes to the construction of more elaborate concepts or theories on how elements of life operate, what I have found to be essential to analysis and inquiry is the incorporation of the experience of others. However, regardless of how convincing an argument I construct, it will continue to be just that: an argument. An argument is a collection of observations intertwined rationally with the intention to

plant a drop of rain into the never-ending sea of knowledge. I call my drop of rain ICEVORG, and I will walk through texts to try to make sense of my proposal and to attempt a somewhat clear communication with you, my reader, by virtue of reflection with myself.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Simulacra and the Void in the Mirror

It was probably 1997 and I was still a student of design in Cuenca, a city located in the highlands of the Andes in Ecuador. The school that I chose to attend was fairly new. My father, who was already retired after having served as a professor of architecture and the dean of the State School of Arts, was one of its cofounders. Founding the school was an attempt to replicate the structure of an educational model that changed the world forever, the German Bauhaus. My father was one of the members of the group of architects and professional artists who decided to found a "new" school to fulfill society's need for a new type of professional. Like no other institution, the Bauhaus (Weimar 1919, Dessau 1925, Berlin 1932) is an icon in the development of art and design education in the modern era. Although there is no such thing as a Bauhaus style, per se, what have come out of that cultural shift are blueprints for the construction of a new order and a new reality (Jaeggi, Oswalt, & Seemann, 2009).

The Bauhaus was, to a certain extent, a political movement in its own right. It was a movement that was manifested not in riots, but rather in attempts to change society from the inside out. The philosophy of the Bauhaus was to pursue the ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk, meaning the integral work of art, in the form of the *Haus am Horn*, a self-contained dwelling designed by Bauhaus painter and teacher Georg Muche. Along with Adolf Meyer and Walter Gropius, Muche designed and built *Haus am Horn* for the Weimar Bauhaus's exhibition in 1923. The concept of the house was to provide society

with “the greatest comfort with the greatest economy by the best craftsmanship and the best distribution of space in form, size, and articulation” (Fox, 2009, p. 71). By demonstrating in practical terms the concept of a total work of art, the Bauhaus was proposing a change in reality and a shift in paradigms that were, by all means, political and meant to affect society as a whole (Forgács, 1991).

When the school was founded, a Bauhaus Manifesto served as its philosophical foundation and constructed the identity of the school, more importantly a relation to the larger community it represented. Appealing to potential Bauhaus students in an elevated prose and emotive language, in the Bauhaus Manifesto Gropius formulated the mature statement of their program:

> The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! To embellish buildings was once the noblest function of the fine arts; they were the indispensable components of great architecture. Today the arts exist in isolation from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, cooperative effort of all craftsmen. Architects, painters and sculptors must recognize anew and learn to grasp the composite character of a building both as an entity and in its separate parts. Only then will their work be imbued with the architectonic spirit, which it has lost as 'salon art'. The old schools of art were unable to produce this unity, since art cannot be taught. They must be merged once more with the workshop. The mere drawing and painting world of the pattern designer and the applied artist must become a world that builds again. When young people who take a joy in artistic creation once more begin their life's work by learning a trade, then the unproductive 'artist' will

> no longer be condemned to deficient artistry, for their skill will be now be preserved for the crafts, in which they will be able to achieve excellence. Architects, sculptors, painters, we all must return to the crafts! For art is not a 'profession'. There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman. In rare moments of inspiration, transcending the consciousness of his will, the grace of heaven may cause his work to blossom into art. But proficiency in a craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies the prime source of creative imagination. Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise towards heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith. (Gropius, 1919, p. 31)

In a publication that I would describe today as advertising (Dahl, 2011), the Bauhaus Manifesto was released to the public. The text was accompanied by Lyonel Feininger's woodcut *The Socialist Cathedral* (Figure 5), which is described by Kramer (1994) in *The New Criterion* in the following terms:

> …a Gothic cathedral rendered in a graphic style that combined semi-abstract Cubist forms with a distinctly Expressionist rather than Constructivist manner. That the medieval cathedral was drafted into service as a symbol for the Bauhaus was only one of the many historical oddities attending its inception, and it caused the school

some trouble when the Bauhaus came to be dubbed ‘the Cathedral of Socialism.’ (p. 2)

Figure 5: Feininger, Lyonel. Woodcut for Program of the State Bauhaus in Weimar. 1919. MoMA, New York. Weimar: Staatliches Bauhaus, 1919.

It is clear that the Bauhaus school’s social purpose was political. The events and circumstances of the school were intertwined with the political and social events of Germany. The contradictions of the Bauhaus became more substantial as society began to mass-produce designed objects, and as this production became more standardized. Technology became a key factor in the fusion of the artist with the technician and the artisan. But, what I intend to stress is the fact that what was really important then, and which may be lacking now, is the political philosophy and the ideological proposal behind

education. The contradiction between the content of the manifesto and its visual representation is a demonstration of early stages of the tension among architects, artists, and craftsmen. I would even suggest that it could be interpreted as evidence of an early tension emerging from the intention to create a sense of interdisciplinarity in education.

In contrast, my Bauhaus education was not charged with politics, a manifesto, or any particular ideology other than to look at the ancient cultures of the Andes from the perspective of design, in a futile and meaningless attempt to "save" them from complete obliteration. What was a German educational model doing in the middle of a small city in the Ecuadorian Andes anyway? That question may be answered by a single word: globalization. Globalization is a model of reality meant to destroy the concept of individuality not only at the personal level, but at the more controversial level of culture, by using mechanical reproduction of the image as the principal and most powerful weapon of mass destruction and conquest. It is through the endless repletion of a single model, such as that of the Bauhaus, that meaning gets diluted and changes. I experienced that dilution firsthand when I became a designer with no particular ideology other than to become a producer of goods—an artist who was not solely an artist and a designer who was not an architect either. I attribute this identity crisis to the fact that I attended a simulation of the Bauhaus, not the real thing. A simulation is not the real, or is it?

Ever since I arrived to Richmond to work on my dissertation, I have decided to go to the gym. It was a major decision, not only because I had been avoiding exercise for a few years, but more importantly because I inherited the "blessing" of unhealthy levels of high cholesterol in my blood. I refer to it as blessing since knowing that my blood is

constituted in such a way has forced me to construct my life around that knowledge, and as a consequence my whole identity. In other words, I have to live according to what my blood's elements dictate. As I walked into the Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Cary Street Gym, the scale astonished me; the level of detail put into the construction of the facilities indicated dedication and commitment to providing students with a venue that I came to call the "Cathedral of Simulacra." In the same fashion that Feininger's woodcut meant to represent "The Socialist Cathedral," VCU's Cary Street Gym has become a place where people come religiously to pledge to the world of simulation and to inadvertently accept it and embrace it as real. I have observed that there is nothing real inside a gymnasium. Nothing at all! Everything is hyperreal, a simulation of the second order, as Baudrillard would claim.

For French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the world is no longer a place where one can find reality. What is reality anyway? I have asked this question since I was 14 years old, at a time when I could not comprehend why the world is the way it is. I had experienced the same feeling before. It happened the day I found out that my eyes capture different interpretations of the same sensory data in front of them. I must have been eight or nine, and I was lying on the bed watching television with my face pushed against it so that one of my eyes was partially covered by the blankets. As I closed the other eye, I "saw" that what my open eye was seeing was a different view of the same scene. That very moment I learned about the gap between my eyes. What was going on? Why were my eyes not seeing the same thing? As I put my hand on my nose, as an extension of my nose to separate what seemed to be a single field of vision, I understood what was happening but

could not make sense of it yet. I needed to learn more, and 30 years later, Baudrillard's texts found me.

When constructing his argument that reality is no longer accessible, Baudrillard uses Jorge Luis Borges's short narrative of an empire that disappeared when it was covered by its own map. The emperor commissioned his cartographers to work on a map to represent the territory. In their desire to make the best work possible, to transcribe with such exactitude the *real*, the actual territory was completely covered and was no longer accessible. Baudrillard argues that meaning, and the construction of meaning, is arbitrary. Baudrillard has brought the terms "simulacra," "simulation," and "hyperreality" into circulation among theorists discussing the relations established between humans and society also between humans and perceived "reality." Baudrillard defines simulation by contrasting it with dissimulation in terms of various modes of feigning. He explains:, "To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't" (Baudrillard, 1988, pp. 167-168). He clarifies his meaning by stating that to simulate is not simply to feign, but that someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms.

When Heyd (2000) describes a good simulacrum, he compares it to something like a column, writing: "It should not disappear from sight if we walk around it. In the same manner we would not expect a column to disappear in the physical world as we walk around it" (p. 16). A simulacrum, however, does not refer to a copy of the original. In Heyd's (2000) words:

> … the notion of simulacra arises in Plato's discussion in the Sophist of two types of imitation: likenesses or similitudes (Greek: eikon) and semblances or simulacra (Greek: phantasma). Plato proposes (in the voice of the Stranger) that '[t]he perfect example' of a likeness 'consists in creating a copy [of a statue] that conforms to the proportions of the original in all three dimensions and giving moreover the proper color to every part.' Simulacra, in contrast, are imitations that seem to be likenesses but are not. Plato's example is of 'colossal' works such as sculptures located on the roofs of temples, the upper part of which was exaggerated in size for the sake of (what the Greeks apparently thought of as) proper aesthetic enjoyment. In the case of such works we have imitation that 'only appears to be a likeness of a well-made figure because it is not seen from a satisfactory point of view, but to a spectator with eyes that could fully take in so large an object [it] would not be even like the original it professes to resemble.' (p. 16)

In other words, for Baudriallard simulacra do not have, necessarily, the same structural quality that likeness claims. The key to understanding his notion of simulacra is to approach it dialectically—by understanding what it is not. He explains: "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 3). I find this reflection fascinating because it contains a whole universe of meaning in only 22 words. It is the foundation for today's reality, where we do not need to dissimulate, to pretend what we do not have, because there is no need to do it. We have it all, and all is a simulation.

## The Cathedral of Simulacra

As I walked into VCU's Cary Street Gym, I experienced the same feeling that I did when I walked into Saint Peters' Cathedral in Vatican City. I felt overwhelmed, anxious, appalled, surprised, excited, skeptical, and intrigued. There were no lit candles in the gym, but the air was warm and the silence invaded every crevasse where it could hide. People do not talk, and when they do, they maintain a certain sense of solemnity. I am not the exception, but rather another sheep walking into the slaughterhouse of past selves, ready to better my flesh-and-bone avatar. The fact that I am there, that anybody is there, is because we acknowledge consciously or subconsciously that our bodies need improvement. To walk into a gym is a demonstration of our imminent decay. In the same fashion as walking out of a church after tuning our spirit, we know that we will have to come again, and again, and again because the body, or spirit, will continue its inexorable downpath to the end.

Interestingly enough, I found out that the building where the Cary Street Gym is located once housed a marketplace, an auditorium, and a warehouse, then it became a world-class recreational facility ("The Cary Street Gym: A Brief History," 2010). The building was designed to simulate the architectural characteristics of a European department store in France or Italy during the late nineteenth century. According to the description published on VCU's facilities site, there is a direct architectural correlation between the Third Street Market (a former use of the building) and the San Lorenzo Market in Florence, Italy: "Both bear remarkably similar gabled roofs and exposed steel frame," the description reads (VCU Recreational Sports, 2010, para. 2). In 1906, the building's function changed from marketplace to Richmond's city auditorium. Later on, it

would be transformed again into a multipurpose warehouse until 1978, when VCU purchased the building to create the Cary Street Gym. As a marginal note, I find it quite interesting—and to a certain extent ironic—that the place was transformed from a marketplace to sell goods to nourish the body into a marketplace of ideas and forms of art to nourish the spirit, to finally a recreational gymnasium to continue fulfilling its nourishing purpose. Good analogies. In 1997, the gym's roof caught fire and made front-page news in the *Commonwealth Times*, the student newspaper (Hill, 1997). In spite of the money invested in fixing the damage, it was not until 2007 that VCU's rapid growth in student population, and the resulting need to keep the school in shape, warranted a full renovation of the building.

As I delved deeper into the layers covering this space, I decided to find out how Baudrillard's metaphor about the map and its territory applied to the Cary Street Gym. If I am going to construct an argument about this place sharing the same symbolic status of a cathedral, I better put my thoughts to the test before going any deeper. I decided to pay a visit to today's cartographer of the Empire: Google. What I discovered is fascinating (Figure 5). As I began my quest inside the digital monster, the monolithic monopoly of cyberspace, or the Wal-Mart of cyberspace as I have baptized it, I was introduced to a super powerful tool called Google Earth®. This software attempts to cover the globe in the same way Borges described in his narrative—eventually with the intent of replacing it. It is a virtual global map. The original software used to map the globe was called EarthViewer 3D, and was created by Keyhole, Inc., a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-funded company acquired by Google in 2004 ("Google Earth," 2015). The free downloadable

software was released as Google Earth® in 2005, and is currently available for use in major electronic platforms, such as Linux, Windows, and Mac OS X, as well as for portable devices running iPhone® OS or Android®. In 2008, the software was also released as a plug-in for Internet browsers. According to Paul Rademacher (2008), the technical facilitator behind the seamless integration of Google Earth® with the Internet browsing experience of every user, the objective of Google Earth is to superimpose images obtained from satellite imagery, aerial photography, and 3D Graphic Information Systems (GIS) to "let people fly around the planet at lighting speed and zoom in on rich high-resolution imagery, mountain ranges, and even 3D buildings" (para. 1). For Rademacher, "the experience of having a piece of software to access the globe from above was not fully developed. It needed to integrate it all in order to cover the map that covers the map" (para. 1). Here Baudrillard's words make even more sense, as he said that covering the territory was not enough, that the replacement of the map has taken over the actual territory to change our perception of it, and therefore of reality. In Rademacher's (2008) own words:

> Today, I'm happy to announce the release of the new Google Earth Browser Plug-in, which brings the full power of Google Earth to the web, embeddable within your own web site. Driven by an extensive JavaScript API, you can control the camera; create lines, markers, and polygons; import 3D models from the web and overlay them anywhere on the planet. In fact, you can even overlay your content over different planets, stars, and galaxies by toggling Sky mode, letting you build 3D Google Sky mashups. You can also enable 3D buildings with a single line of JavaScript, attach JavaScript callbacks to mouse events, fetch KML data from the

> web, and more. Our goal is to open up the entire core of Google Earth to developers in the hopes that you'll build the next great geo-based 3D application, and change (yet again) how we view the world. (para. 2)

Google certainly has changed the way we view the world. Yet, that change has been received with criticism. According to Matthew and Shambaugh (2005), it is quite easy for a wide range of actors, such as scholars conducting research, tourists obtaining travel information, and terrorists gathering information about potential targets, to take advantage of the navigation opportunities offered by easily accessible networks, such as Google Earth. Matthew and Shambaugh argue that the same resources that empower contemporary economic and political systems also have the capacity to generate incentives, capabilities, and opportunities for illicit actors, which could result in implications for human and national security proving the unexpected connections between reality and representation.

It is interesting to note the efforts that have taken place to cover certain areas that have been deemed potential targets of terrorist attacks, as well as sensible spots where national security may have been compromised. Such spots include military facilities in Israel, South Korea, Russia, India, and the infamous spot known as Groom Lake, Homey Airport, Dreamland, Paradise Ranch, Home Base, Watertown Strip, or by its popular culture name, Area 51 (“Area 51,” 2015). Officially, Area 51 is referred to as the Nevada Test and Training Range, and is operated by the United States Government and the CIA. Even Hamas,[4] the Islamic resistance movement, has reportedly used Google Earth to plan

[4] Arabic: حماس Ḥamās, "enthusiasm", an acronym of حركة المقاومة الاسلامية Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʾIslāmiyyah, "Islamic Resistance Movement") is the Palestinian Sunni Islamic or Islamist organization, with an associated military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, located in the Palestinian territories.

rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza. In other words, all of the evidence seems to point to the fact that the map has indeed covered the territory, and not content with it, another map has already began to emerge to cover it as well. Yet, once again, this new map claims to be an even better representation than the representation itself and will eventually cover its predecessor under the promise of technological improvement.

In Figure 6, I have digitally constructed a composition of screen shots and digital photographs that show the Cary Street Gym as raw information obtained from Google Earth Pro®. The first two screen captures on the top are depictions of what claims to be the most advanced version available as of October 2013. Figure 6 is a collection of 3D geometric constructions that represent the size and scale of the buildings in shades of gray, while showing the selected spot—in this particular case, the Cary Street Gym—in color to establish a focal point. The software itself allows control over the perspective point and the aerial point of view, something that is impossible in real life unless one has access to a helicopter. Not even a plane or helicopter could get as close to the flexibility and control over the views and angles. When compared to a traditional printed map, the versatility and control offered by a hyperreal approach is unparalleled and impossible to match by any real situation. The next two panels/screen captures correspond to two other forms of representation that let us, as viewers, play with the imagery in such a way that we can collect more information than we may ever need to, and from point of views that are, once more, not possible with the so-called naked eye

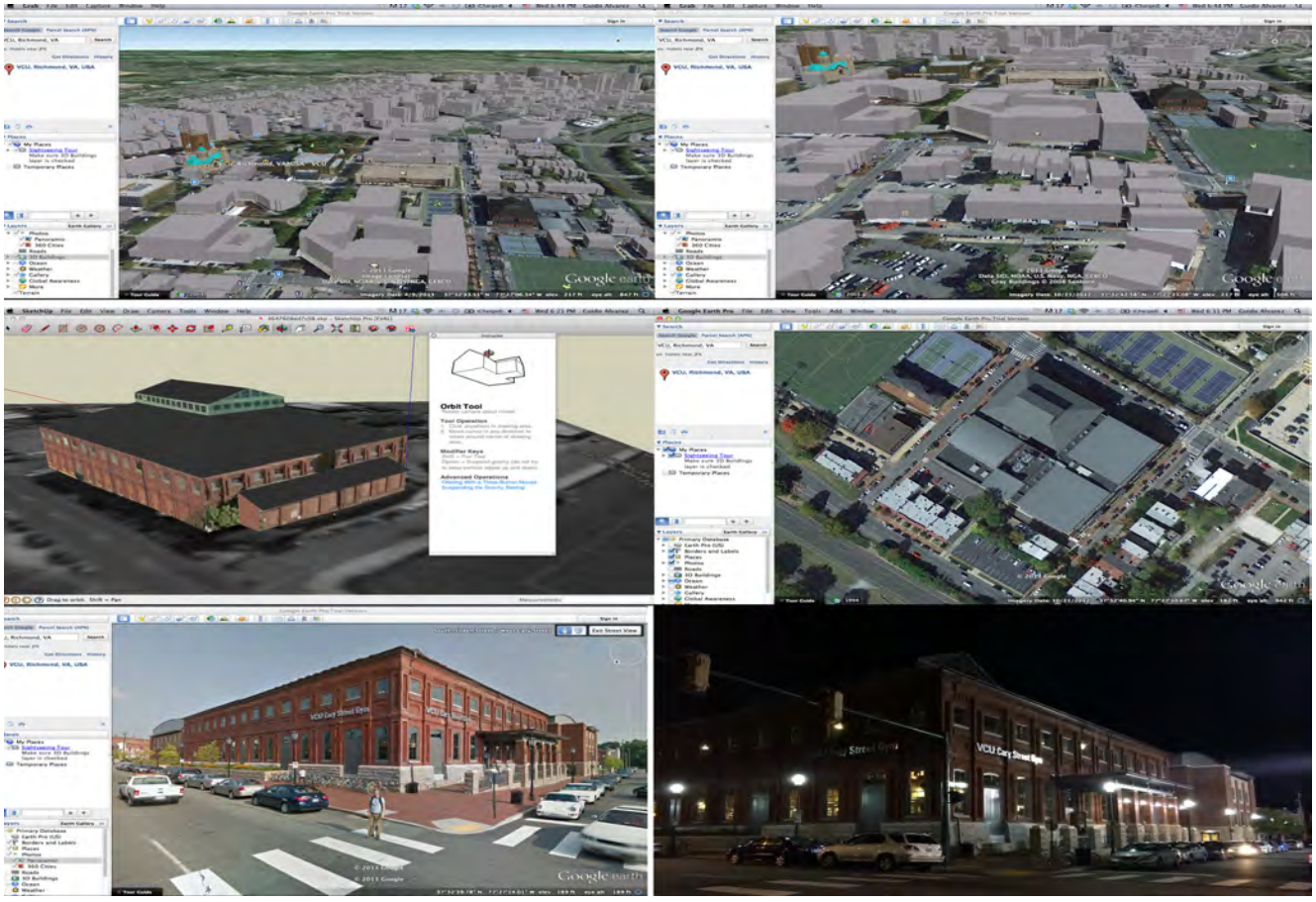


***Figure 6:*** *Cary Street Gym.* Image composition of several screen captures to show Google Earth's capability to digitally construct a reality that contains more information that what our senses are capable of perceiving. The last two images at the bottom had been captured with current technology and under circumstances that would not have been possible otherwise. They are examples of the order of the Hyperreal. Bottom right hand corner image by the author using an iPhone® 4s.

As a result of these introductory observations, I am comfortable in supporting the argument that the Cary Street Gym is indeed a place that exists beyond its physical presence in space and time. I argue that it does qualify as a monumental structure comparable to that of a temple or church in terms of scale and occupation in space and time. In the same fashion that any cathedral exists to make a point in the urban landscape,

the gym stands out among the other buildings. The structure is an 18,000-square-foot fitness center with over 185 pieces of fitness equipment, and 7 weight circuits. Flat screen TVs are all over the place, all showing up to four different channel-feeds side by side, though none of them with audio. There are smaller monitors throughout the space as well that are constantly showing VCU announcements from the university calendar, postings about research studies, and the like. However, I have noticed that most people are not paying attention to them. When they are not in the middle of routine, and sometimes while they exercise as well, their attention is on their rectangular cell phone screens. My somewhat hyperbolic claim is that the Cary Street Gym is a monumental construction, comparable to that of a temple or church, with discrete sections, regulations, and rituals,, America as a hologram.

The first thing to catch my attention is the entry protocol. Everybody is required to have their fingerprint digitized in the same way one does when entering the United States through customs. Without relinquishing one's identity, there is no access to the Cathedral. In that moment, the level of my curiosity hits the roof. My fingerprint? Really? Do I need a passport to enter this sacred space? Yes, a VCU I.D., and my now my digitized palm-print. As I walk further into the beast, I see what seems to be a skyscraper rock-climbing wall, where humans tied to ropes are climbing to demonstrate their bravery. The wall has in front of it a smaller formation that sits in the center of the area designated for climbing. On this rather tiny mountain, people can pretend they are free climbing without the need of a second person to prevent their injury or even death from a 30-foot freefall. As I keep exploring the space, I find a four-court area where people can play basketball, volleyball,

table tennis, and badminton. The areas can be divided with huge drapes that remind me of theater curtains; “Are they stages where people play?” I wonder.

Many walls had been designed as cells of lockers that vary in size and are digitally operated with a temporary personal code. The first two or three times I visited the Cathedral, I remembered very well the code I chose to lock my belongings, but I could not remember the exact location of the locker. They all look alike. Wondering about the purpose of that design decision and the lack of visual discrimination for the user, I cannot help but think of the concept of normalization as removing individuality, and furthermore, the notion that one becomes nothing but a numbered subject to reuse at the end of a cycle.

The Cathedral has more to offer: on the second floor, there is an indoor turf area for playing soccer, dodge ball, or any other related activity (Figure 6). The turf is green and it represents a soccer field reduced in scale and surrounded by thick panels of tempered glass to keep viewers from getting hit by the ball. The regulation lines on the artificial grass are part of the grass itself, so no need to repaint them. Outside the glass cage, there are several stands where people can sit to watch the game evolve. A huge panel hovers over the turf to announce the score and time remaining. Further down the aisle, one can find the indoor running track that lets you run to the place where you started by selecting different lanes, some designated for walking, others for running. Nine and a half laps equals one mile. On the same floor, one can find racquetball courts as well. Drinking fountains and bathrooms are located throughout the space.

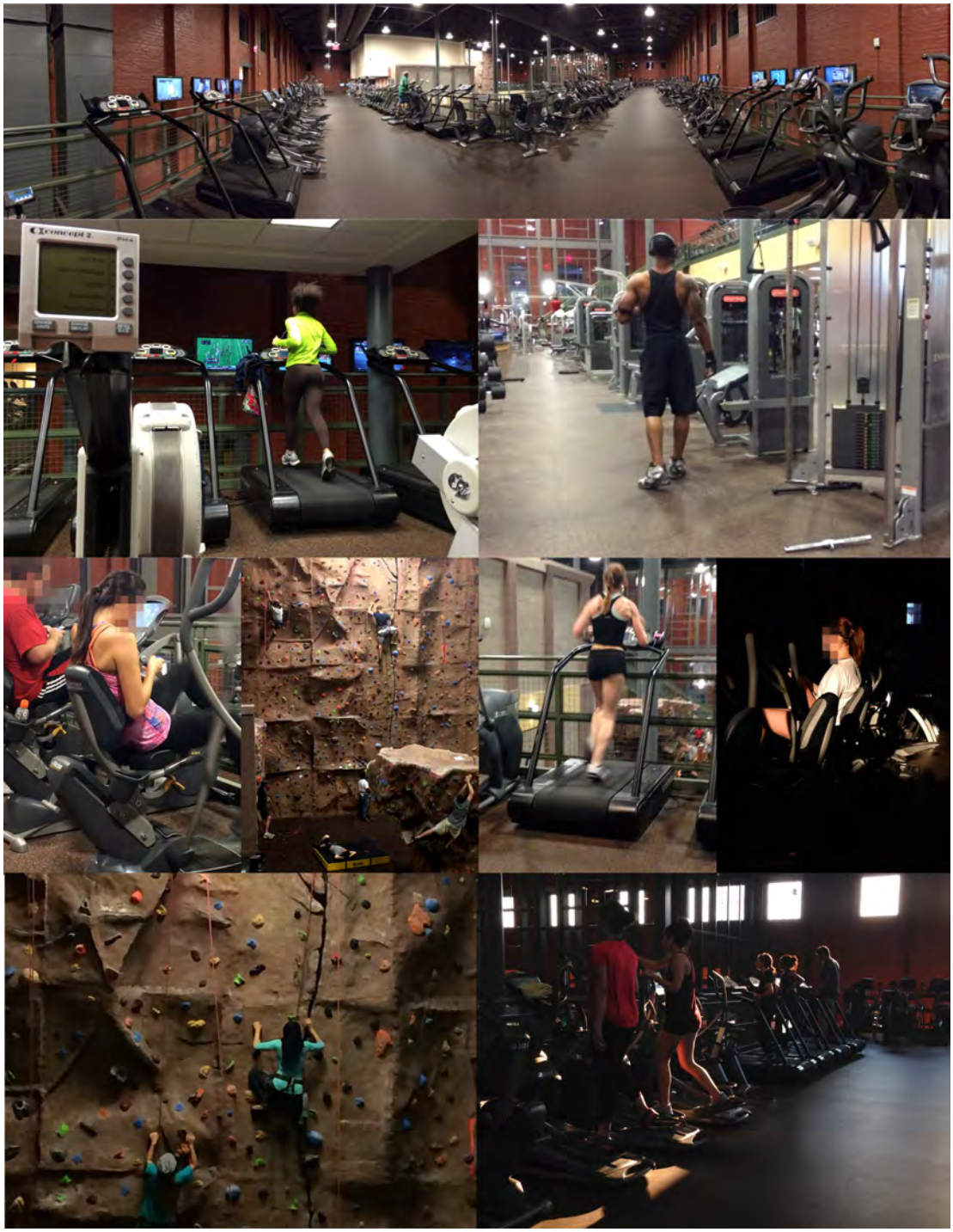

Figure 7: Digital images captured during several workout sessions to illustrate the different areas, equipment, and spaces available at the Cary Street Gym. All images were captured by the author using an iPhone® 4s "smart" cellular phone.

In *America*, Baudrillard's (1986) key insight is expressed in a highly charged quote that reads: "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality" (p. 28). Here Baudrillard is referring to his experience visiting America, observing that its population has no sense of simulation, but is itself simulation in the most developed state. Americans are unable to perceive their conditions because they do not have the language to describe it; they are models (Rubenstein, 2010). America is described by Baudrillard as a "giant hologram," where the whole can be refracted into any of its parts, whether a desert, a street in a Midwestern town, a Burger King, or a Californian house. For Baudrillard, America's reality is profoundly cinematographic (Rubenstein, 2010)[5]. He traveled through America with the intention of documenting his experiences in a phenomenological way, as a firsthand experience. During his travels, he became fascinated by popular sporting activities, including: break dancing, marathon running, skateboarding, jogging, bodybuilding, and windsurfing. Many of these shared the attribute of self-reference towards death, often by seeking sacrificial exhaustion or what Baudrillard would describe as an intentional suicide to create meaning (Genosko, 2010)[6]. According to Genosko, Baudrillard's interest focused on Formula One motor racing. He observed that driver and machine are joined seamlessly with the human acting as a double of his car, a projectile, that allows the driver to experience life and death at the same time, and this experience would let the driver feel alive.

However, the relationship observed between the driver and his racing car is

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[5] Smith, R. G. (2010). *The Baudrillard dictionary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[6] Smith, R. G. (2010). *The Baudrillard dictionary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

replicated in the less dramatic relationship between a person and his or her car. The connection between object and person enables the experiencing of utopia through the interstate highway, a path that "leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone" (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 53). In *America*, he is particularly touched by the observation of men running. In his engaging, poetic description of a man running, he describes the activity as primitive, as an out-of-body experience performed to deny, even reject, the subconscious perception of the simulacra by the American people. He even goes on to compare a running man with a possessed spirit elevating the status of transcendence through a meaningless act, that of running, to discover the meaningless end of his life and life of everyone in an amazing textual construction, in my opinion:

> Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on the beach, swathed in the sounds of his Walkman, cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts… [t]he jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed. (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 38)

It all makes sense to me now. As I keep discovering the never-ending layers of simulation that make up the Cary Street Gym, I can do nothing other than feel amazed by the prowess of Baudrillard in his acute observations of the replacement of reality. As I gaze and gaze, I unearth the layers of simulation until I reach what I see as the heart of the Cathedral of Simulacra: the underground level where the baptismal fountain welcomes us all to be

reborn in the hyperreal. A complete section below the surface of the earth has been dug up to create what could have been in the past a water hole or a natural subterranean fountain, but is today an aquatic facility.

To my amazement, there is a huge hot tub functioning as an appendage of a longer pool that ends with another circular appendage. Not only is the temperature inside the belly of the building different (warmer), but it also artificially controlled throughout the space as in every building in America.

Figure 8: Baptismal Fountain. Digital images captured by the author using an iPhone® 4s "smart" cellular phone to show the Cathedral of Simulation's baptismal font.

The water emanating from the hot tub is much warmer than the other pools, and the water jets simulate a waterfall with pressure obtained from electronically controlled engines generated by machines that are kept out of sight.

With the exactitude of a map, the design of the pools was intentionally made to demonstrate complete control over the elements. The precision needed to construct a building of this magnitude specifically devoted to the act of practicing sports, reminds me of Baudrillard's words when he describes Formula One racing. The desire to control the elements indicates how important gymnasiums are within American culture. Meeting the "vortex" made the Cathedral of Simulacra memorable. "The vortex" is the name I used to refer to the appendage at the end of the lane that accents the pool. It is a circular construction that has engines to simulate a mass of whirling water similar to a whirlwind, which is designed to provide resistance to the people who choose to walk inside this area. This is a temple, I keep telling myself, a temple devoted to worship, and the pools are the baptismal font where we are born into a parallel reality that promises to be much better than any reality previously experienced.

When I imagine the space empty, every day after midnight, with nobody inside, no breathing souls, only computerized electronic systems to secure the environment, I think of Baudrillard's (1989) words describing the desert surrounding Las Vegas as a "sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality" (p. 71). It is an empty space void of meaning, sterile, and cleansed to keep the promise of exactitude we expect, as clients, users, and worshipers of the Cathedral. It was then, in ruminating about the

empty space, that the insight about the space and its level of simulation came to me. I imagined the space and it fit Baudrillard's (1986) description word for word:

> [T]he silence is something extraordinary, as though it were itself all ears. It is not the silence of cold, nor of barrenness, nor of an absence of life… A silence internal to the Valley itself, the silence of underwater erosion, below the very waterline of time, as it is below the level of the sea. No animal movement. Nothing dreams here, nothing talks in its sleep. Each night the earth plunges into perfectly calm darkness, into the blackness of its alkaline gestation, into the happy depression of its birth. (p. 71)

As I connected his words to my experiences with the space and in the space, it all came full circle to me. Simulacrum was a fact and there was nothing I could do about it, or even anything I would like to do about it, other than observe the phenomenon evolve and take over. Reality has gone defunct; it is no longer accessible, except by means of scholarly analysis or deep, systematically controlled observation. It is an illusion constructed on the basis of disappearing images and reflections of reflections in the same fashion that a mirror reflects itself on the mirroring surface of another mirror. "Behind every fragment of reality, something has to have disappeared in order to ensure the continuity of nothing" (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 3). And in order for this to take place, Baudrillard suggests that an endless proliferation of images and screens must occur. The image can no longer reflect the Real because the image for Baudrillard *is* the Real. In his book *The Perfect Crime* (1996), he elaborates on the notion of simulation by arguing that images as representations of objects have disappeared by becoming transparent to themselves, and, at the same time,

entirely present to themselves in real time. Instead of being absent from themselves in illusion, he suggests, “they are forced to register on thousands of screens, off whose horizons not only the real has disappeared, but the image too” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 5). It is only through technology, Baudrillard argues, that the endless reflections can be gathered to let us observe what remains of the world that once was real.

However, I would like to pause for a moment to reflect deeper on the function of the Cathedral of Simulacra. I have observed that we go there regularly, and that our behavior is similar, to a certain extent, to the way we behave inside any sacred space in search of wisdom, spiritual clarity, and existential guidance, all of which ground us in reality and ultimately provide a source of empowerment to exist in the Real. Yet, when I analyze the reasons why we walk into the Cathedral of Simulacra, and if my observations are correct, an equivalent source of wisdom, guidance, and grounding in a different reality should be procured. When I walk out of a catholic cathedral I left with a sense of peace and achievement. The cleansing process reboots my inner dialogue and I feel reassured. When I walked out of the gym a similar sensation takes place but for my body. In spite of worn out muscles and body damped in sweat I feel fine. We do both in the name of personal improvement. But why? I ask myself. Why do we come to the Cathedral of Simulacra other than to improve our selves, to cleanse our bodies and minds, and to ultimately construct a better self? I will argue then that the main function of the Cathedral of Simulacra is to improve our selves through the betterment of our bodies, or the betterment of our *avatars*,[7] a concept that I will deconstruct and analyze as my dissertation evolves.

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7 From the Sanskrit noun avatāra meaning "to cross over"

Yet, why is it that we need to go to a sacred place? Konieczny (2009) argues that "public ritual carries social as well as religious meanings as shown especially in studies of objects and spaces in which dramaturgy, practice, and bodily experience are emphasized" (p. 419). According to Konieczny, these studies assume the importance of contexts for interpreting ritual—contexts that include not only material, sensory, and bodily elements, but also the social relations with which these are intertwined (Bell 1992; Brown 1991; Orsi 1985; Turner 1982). She argues that even religious architecture and artistic representations used in worship can contain social meanings alongside religious meanings; furthermore, these meanings are replaced by new interpretations as they are passed from generation to generation. New generations then reinterpret spaces, as well as objects, constituting a remake of material culture, and, ultimately, of collective and individual identity. The modifications procured by the reinterpretations of spaces and objects can "Disclose changing, renewed, and or/remade identities; they are, in effect, socially informed aesthetic responses to the past" (Konieczny, 2009, p. 421).

I will argue then that gymnasiums, such as the case of the Cathedral of Simulacra can be interpreted as a secular temple where new generations not only construct, reconstruct, and alter their bodies, but in doing so, live under the presumption that they can control their identities.

**The Magic Mirror on the Screen**

**Queen**: Magic Mirror on the wall, who now is the fairest one of all?

**Magic Mirror**: Over the seven jeweled hills, beyond the seventh fall, in the cottage of the seven dwarfs, dwells Snow White, fairest one of all.

**Queen**: Snow White lies dead in the forest. The huntsman has brought me proof. Behold her heart.

**Magic Mirror**: Snow White still lives, the fairest in the land. 'Tis the heart of a pig you hold in your hand.

**Queen**: *[repulsed]* The heart of a pig! Then I've been tricked![8]

I had religiously frequented the Cathedral of Simulacra during Fall 2013 as part of my field research to develop this dissertation, and as I mentioned earlier, after my doctor condemned me to the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle. I was never interested in playing team sports, and when I did (I used to play basketball obsessively), I would play and practice solo. I devoted hours and hours to shooting a ball into a hoop in hopes that it would go through, and, when it did, the whole process began all over again. It was nonsense, but being a creature of habit, in practicing basketball, I found peace from my wandering brain. During my college years in the 1980s, gyms began to sprout up all over the cityscape, and without hesitation, I joined one. I cannot recall how my body began its transformation, except on one occasion when I felt a "bump" in the back of my arm. It was a cold afternoon when I finally met my triceps, and I must admit that it was a nice day in

[8] Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Prod. Walt Disney Productions, 1937. Transcript.

the reconstruction of my identity. After many years of what may be described as an interest in bodybuilding, the interest vanished and was replaced by the grind of daily life. Still, my long, solo basketball sessions did not stop until much later when I injured one of my Achilles tendons. I was in my mid-thirties, and decided to retire from the imaginary NBA.[9]

The reason why I include these anecdotes is because being part of the gym culture, and the imaginary NBA culture, became integral to the construction of my identity. I was in my design education years when the legendary Michel Jordan led the Chicago Bulls to their historic victories. By the 1990s, Michael Jordan's basketball games could be seen in 93 nations. This exposure was possibly due to the emergence of new communication technologies, particularly direct broadcast satellite (DBS), which was launched into orbit by NASA, thus securing control of broadcast messages. With names like Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, and transnational companies such as Disney, Viacom, and Time Warner creating satellite cable networks oblivious to geographical boundaries, the world had entered a new era, one which complied with the order of the hyperreal inasmuch as it was a territory covered by a new one made of electronic information that gave a sense of a smaller world. The nineties was also a time when the professional basketball players decided to rid their heads from bodily fibers as a fashion statement and go bald. I was no exception. In a small town in the middle of the Andes, the removal of my hair was quite an event. I was 21, or perhaps 22, and from that day on, my head has been shaved. Even though my receding hairline has claimed as much space as possible, I maintain "control" over the way I look. The lack of hair growing on my head has become an integral part of

[9] National Basketball Association

the way I construct my identity and that of my avatar. I construct one of many representations of who I am as a result of a process of internalization, a process designed to construct an image meant to reflect back to my consciousness that which I perceive in the mirror. The internalization I experience in the mirror occurs in much the same way that any other shining surface that claims to have the capacity of showing us who we "really" are, monitors, screens, video, digital cameras, cell phones, even audio devices, are designed to capture and reflect our selves, and then feed that perception, and therefore our very personal "reality." This is a process by which every individual constructs a visual representation of the self for the other. The construction of one's own avatar becomes particularly evident when the Cathedral of Simulacra enters into the discourse. I argue that this place could be theorized as a factory of avatars.

In an essay entitled "A Manifesto for Avatars," Little (1999) introduces the notion of avatar by indicating that the word "avatar" originally referred to the incarnation of Hindu deities. Transferred to the realm of the computer, he argues, avatars have come to mean "any of the various 'strap-on' visual agents that represent the user in increasing numbers of 2 and 3D worlds" (p. 3). According to Little, the use of the term "avatar" to represent the self or user in the context of shared online internet environments first occurred in the early 1980s with the development of LucasFilm's *Habitat Project*. The term then became mainstream with the success of the Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash*.[10] Stephenson's protagonist, Hiro Protagonist, discovers the name of a new pseudo-narcotic called "Snow Crash," which serves as a mediating agent to access what

[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snow_Crash

Stephenson dubs the "Metaverse." Here, online participants have virtual bodies, and the hackers can be spotted by the fine detail of their avatars, or virtual bodies, whereas the general public can only purchase low-resolution avatars at Wal-Mart (Seneca, 1994). The Snow Crash effects are apparently unique in that they are experienced in the Metaverse as well as in the physical world. The blurring of boundaries between the two worlds is, I argue, the distinctive characteristic that connects the world of fantasy with the physical reality we are limited to experiencing with our senses. Or put differently, in his 2006 book *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Walter Benn Michaels describes how the bodies of humans are infected by information they can't read; the virus, he claims, gets the words inside you even if you have not read them. Michaels emphasizes Stephenson's (1992) views that languages are codes rather than groupings of letters and sounds to be interpreted. For Michaels, the transgression between worlds (as described by fiction) is possible to observe today in different and emerging media. To illustrate the transgressions taking place today, he uses the analogy between the digital virus and the biological virus—between computer code and genetic code—and how when a body that is infected by a virus does not become infected because "it understands the virus any more than the body that does not become infected misunderstands the virus" (Michaels, 2006, p. 69). To clarify, one does not need to be conversant in different codes to be affected by them. That is essentially what occurs when we create avatars to represent our bodies.

It is important to note that discussions of the nature of avatar are often mixed with current cyborg theory (Haraway, 1991), a theory that I will refer to as my discourse unfolds. However, in order to construct a clear picture of how I understand avatars in this

project, it must be said that avatars are not the same as cyborgs. In a nutshell avatars are representations of the person whereas a cyborg is both the person and its representation. Avatars do not have a body whereas cyborgs cannot exist without a body. Avatars are lifeless, inert matter, Cyborgs are hybrid forms of flesh and technology. Cyborgs can be represented as avatars but avatars cannot be cyborgs as they are representations of organic or hybrid forms.

That said, both avatars and cyborgs forge an alternative resistance and a set of forceful conditions for imaging what Turkle (2005) has termed "the second self," a concept based in imaging, language, and psychology.

As I observe the people in the Cathedral of Simulacra, and how they move, act, and interact, I can see a clear connection between the notion of avatar and what is actually taking place today, any day, inside the walls of the Cary Street Gym. What is the main purpose of people but to create a better looking, healthier, and more socially acceptable self? To socialize in silence? To feel part of a larger community? I have no doubt about the aforementioned reasons that stimulate a person to work on its body at the gym, especially when I speak from my very personal and unique point of view, as if I could have another. I am there to better myself, to control the levels of cholesterol and triglycerides in my blood stream. But it does not end there; I am there for the social interaction too, or the lack thereof. Even though we share the same space, as humans, we are isolated from others by means of technology. An important number of people, including myself, are connected to media through earplugs. We are isolated purposefully, yet sharing the same air. Why? What is the purpose of this self-imposed isolation? Would it be reasonable to argue that

we, the people inhabiting the space at any given moment in time as a collective consciousness, are located in more than one reality at a time?

Perhaps my argument reads like science fiction, yet I argue that we do live this way; we do exist in different realities simultaneously. Are these realities overlapping or rather in conflict? I cannot but wonder and find out. Moreover, the spaces or realities that we experience in any single time continuum are not limited to two, but are theoretically limitless thanks to the design, construction, and nourishment of the avatars we create to represent us. In order to better understand the notion of avatar that I am proposing in my work, I need make a strong reference to a component of the avatar that is of vital importance: the production itself. The avatar as reflective image depends on a medium to come to be. The ontology of an avatar begins in the production of the reflected image, also expressed in terms of a process that is defined as a codependency of language and code.

In his book *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard (1975) claims that the simulation model for creating oneself is defined by its mode of production, and that it is determined by the system of exchange of value, and more profoundly by its code: "[Man] can think of himself only as something to produce, to transform, or bring about as value" (p. 20). By transforming one's self, value can be added as an intentional layer of meaning, yet in doing so, we simultaneously become dependent on the image we construct. We become our own phantasm. Baudrillard (1975) explains:

> This remarkable phantasm is confused with that of representation, in which man becomes his own signified for himself and enjoys himself as the content of value

> and meaning in a process of self-expression and self-accumulation whose form escapes him. (p. 20)

Baudrillard's (1975) reflection becomes evident as I analyze the roles that avatars play in our lives, and how the reduction of the representation of the self to the limitations of an image mediates our new forms of existence in electronic worlds. Even though Baudrillard is discussing politics and the economy, I find his insights to be completely applicable to the construction of identity in cyberspace, as the current systems of production have shifted from mechanical to electronic; they have shifted from real to hyperreal and beyond. In this role, the construction of the self as a reflected image adds value to the process itself. As Baudrillard (1975) argues, it is not a question of "being" oneself but of "producing" oneself (p. 20). The ultimate dimension of value and meaning, he indicates, relies on the way a human being has "learned to reflect on himself, to assume himself, to posit himself according to this scheme of production which is assigned to him" (Baudrillard, 1975, p. 19).

To complicate the point, Little (1999) explains that avatars are homogenous representations rooted in prevailing constructions of successful commodification and accumulation, for example: pop icons, juvenile fantasies, dumbed-down cartoon characters, and racially pure, young, white "perfect bodies." The avatar, he contends, is being used as a tool for the "playful generation of territories of signification and empowerment" (Little, 1999, p. 5). The juxtaposition of meanings presented by both Baudrillard and Little when describing representations of the self assist the creator –a.k.a.

operator—of the avatar in the process of accumulation of meaning, and ultimately in the accumulation of power through representation.

If this holds true, then anybody can generate power through representation. My experiences as a designer, an artist, and, above all, as an educator, confirm these theoretical observations. When I go to the Cathedral of Simulacrum, I do gain leverage over my consciousness, as the awareness of my body and mind become more acute. I feel lighter. As a matter of fact, I have shed about 15 pounds throughout the development of my work by regularly attending the Cathedral. I feel better as well, both emotionally and psychologically. At the same time, I am acutely aware that this is all nonsense. Such a realization becomes the dialectical force that helps me stay focused when analyzing the experience. But who do we really care for? Is it my body or the man reflected on the surface of the mirror that is meant to be consumed by others? Am I really constructing myself as a physical manifestation of my consciousness, or is it the image reflected on the surface of the screen or mirror that I am concerned about most? The distinction between the two is relevant and significant.

When Little (1999) discusses avatars, he describes them as visual representations of a corporeal body, a strap-on visual agent, he calls it. But what is more important is that the use of avatars involves a pairing or doubling at a metaphysical, semantic, and dimensional level, "between the corporeal and the immanent, language and thing, image and imaged, mind and body, and we shall see, between self and commodity"(Little, 1999, p. 6). As a commodity, avatars are drawn from the image database of advertising, fashion, and

entertainment. Little connects the idea of the avatar and the social, cultural, and economic aspects explaining its ontology in these terms:

> These countless generic representations-big-breasted, small-waisted babes, idealized perfect-skinned trim and tan hunks, Disney-derived characters, bowling pins, smiley faces, coffee cups, exotic animals, and steroid-driven snarling, hard-boiled war machines-are not just the tool of the user behind the screen, but convert instruments of multinational capitalism. (p. 4)

There are then two principles governing the definition of avatar relevant to my argument and the application of this theory to the works of art to come: 1) avatars are corporeal representations of an individual in this or that space; and 2) avatars provide a source of identity not for being oneself, but for producing oneself, from both conscious activity to primitive productions of desire (Little, 1999). For Baudrillard (1979), the human species comes to consciousness through the mirror of production at the level of the imaginary, and by going through it, humans recognize themselves "objectively." Yet, humans are engaged in "a continual deciphering of himself through his works, finalized by his shadow, reflected by this operational mirror, this sort of ideal of a productivist ego" (p. 19).

In regards to my theorization of the Cathedral of Simulacra, I have followed Baudrillard's (1979) reflections concerning the way in which humans devote time and energy to construct the identities through the image they project, and more importantly, through the way they interact with the reflecting surface to begin with. To visit the Cathedral regularly entails a continual production and reproduction of the self. A continual production and reproduction of desire for the self at a more subconscious level, I argue,

places us in a constant battle to reduce the space between our physical presence in this reality and the space where reflected image exists. We do all of this in hopes of breaking free from the constraints of the reality where we are physically imprisoned. It is only when we touch the medium where the reflection is constructed that we become aware of the illusion. It is only then when the medium becomes visible that we can acknowledge its presence, changing its function from container of meaning to access point into its structure. Our body, as Baudrillard (1979) would claim, is like a Formula One racing car at the height of performance, with our consciousness becoming one with the reflected image. I find his observation particularly true inside the Cary Street Gym where people, informed by the reflection in the mirror, go to cultivate their bodies. The reflected image in combination with consciousness, as Baudrillard suggests, becomes a unity similar to the racecar driver and his double, the Formula One car. The reflected image as perceived by one's self works simultaneously with the body, with "each propelling the other to extremes without being really clear which is the engine of this meteoric advance and which merely the other's double" (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 166). For Baudrillard, the alliance between car and driver creates a pact reconciled by "the phantasm, the spectra, the ecstasy of speed" (p. 166). When I analyze his reflections in relation to the Cathedral of Simulacra, and the way a human being relates to his or her reflected image, I find this relationship to be equivalent, except for the key difference that the pact is not about speed, but about power and control. Speed on its own right is a form of power expressed in much deeper ways that the mind can understand. Facilitated by technology, and particularly by nanotechnology speed has become integral to the fabric of the every day life. From the flow of electronic money to

the unprecedented speed by which personal romantic relationships begin and end everything moves at the speed of light. Cutting one tenth of a second in the stock market translates into billions of dollars moving from one pocket to the next. As the old adage declares that "time is money" today I would argue that "speed is power". The image reflected in the mirror provides constant feedback to its referent, and by virtue of that feedback, lets the "driver of the body"—or operator—develop a sense of power through the nourishment of the image. In the same fashion that Baudrillard describes the racecar driver merging with his double, the car, the image and its reflection in the gym no longer have identities of their own. Baudrillard explains:

> [C]ar and driver are merely a living projectile, whose purpose is to reach the goal. Keep your sights fixed on the podium… [a] perpetual calculation. The projectile has to be constantly regulated, corrected. Only in appearance is the circuit the site of the competition. The competition takes place elsewhere – on the world car market, in the driver's popularity charts, in advertising and the star system. The race takes place on a screen, the screen of speed. For in these extreme reaches, speed is no longer exactly a spatial dimension but a screen on which the driver has to move with the dexterity of a teleconductor. (p. 168)

After 45 minutes of running nowhere with my feet locked to a machine, I am sweating, and the temperature of my body must adapt to the new circumstances it has been subjected to in order to preserve a balance. The increasing temperature becomes even more acute at the waist level due to the "sauna" band that is wrapped around my belly. Further north in the territory of my body, earplugs feed me Adorno's (1997) *Aesthetic Theory*, as read by a

computer-generated voice. Reading long texts is, for me, more complex than solving a Rubik's cube. I found a solution to my problem in the services of digital interpretation. I have had whole books transformed from scanned images of each page to live texts by using optical character recognition (OCR) software, followed by a computer's aural interpretation of the text. In other words, "Robert," the computerized voice, is reading theory to me—including the page numbers and footnotes (with acceptable glitches). This is possible thanks to ReadTheWords.com, which offers software that converts written texts into spoken audio files. According to the site's description, the company started in January 2008 and promised "to assist students with learning disabilities with their studies by means of auditory learning and auditory processing" (para. 4). I must admit that I do feel like the driver of the racecar. Whereas reading was pure and simple medieval torture, technology has helped me cover five to eight hours of material per day through listening.

The machine I am riding like a maniac lets me know not only my heartbeat, but also the number of imaginary loops I have completed, as well as calories burned, strides taken, and many other forms of practically useless information. I cannot help but think what the same numbers of any given person working in a cotton field all day would have been. Or what about the numbers of a Chinese worker laying train tracks in the American West? In addition to *listering*, a portmanteau of my very own creation to signify "reading with the ears," interesting argument: does the concept of textuality change partly in the process of listening as against the reading? I am making a digital composition using my iPhone® 4s®, which is connected to the Long Term Evolution (LTE) network® cellular network, and utilizes Adobe® Photoshop® Touch for iPhone®. I am combining a photograph

captured with my phone with a previously hand-drawn paper illustration; this is multitasking at its peak. While experts have concluded that multitasking is not possible, I respectfully disagree, given the circumstances. Although, I cannot avoid wondering what it is that I am doing here: listening to the convoluted ideas of Adorno, painting a picture that is not one, running nowhere yet feeling satisfied because I am bettering myself. Damn! What's going on with me? Is this real? Am I one more interloper in the desert of the Real, as Baudrillard would claim? Am I a character in a Jorge Luis Borges's narrative? As soon as I look up and attentively observe around me, I quickly conclude that I am not, and that I am instead trapped inside simulacra sponsored by my very own desire to nourish my avatar.

At the same time, I look downstairs and see the dialogue between a human and his avatar; I see the fully engaged interaction of a person with his projected image (Figure 9). It is taking place in front of one of the many mirrors that inhabit the Cathedral. These mirrors serve as a medium where worshippers can keep constant dialogue with their forms to ensure that the production process fits standards established by advertising, media, and the art industry. The man I observe seems to be dancing at first, but as I pay closer attention, I decipher that he is actually fighting. Could my point of view be any better? This guy is fighting his own image to improve himself! Could this be more poetic? More revealing? Is this a blissful insight or pure serendipity? The avatar/operator dances to simulate a fight with himself in a representation of what boxers would call "shadowing." Shadowing is an exercise used in training for combat sports to prepare the muscles for later, stronger physical activity. Boxers do not talk about playing one another; boxing is a

contest and a battle, but rarely a game. It is hierarchically organized, strictly monitored, painstakingly mundane, and tightly sequenced (Hoffman, 2006). The man I observe is simulating a fight to represent the concept of "shadowing," but he is not shadowing, per se; he is simulating it. The act of simulating a fight with his very own image is an act of performance.

Figure 9: Shadowing Self. Digital images captured by the author using an iPhone® 4s "smart" cellular phone to illustrate the relationship between body and reflection as it is constructed inside the Cathedral of Simulacra.

Therefore, what I captured with my camera that night in the Cathedral of Simulacra is a clear and concise example of what Lacan (1960) identifies as the mirror stage, only what I observed was in a context other than Lacan's infamous child discovering his or her own image. According to Lacan, the mirror stage marks a critical and defining moment in a subject's psychic development. It contributes to "a form of its totality" in the subject's spatial identification of itself (Lynch, 2008). Lynch (2008) analyzes the construction of the ego as it is proposed by Lacan from a Hegelian perspective (dialectal reasoning) to assert that it is only after the recognition of the image constructed by the mirror and assimilated by the brain that we are capable of constructing our identity and consequently develop social interactions.

Additionally, in analyzing Lacan's mirror stage, Lynch (2008) observes that the mirror stage "establishes the framework for inter-subjective illusion" (p. 216). My rather light musings on Lacan's theoretical construct regarding the development of the human psyche serve a very specific purpose: to establish the irrefutable argument that the reflection of one's self as a means of representation plays a fundamental role in the construction of a reality. I must emphasize that this is a reality, *one* reality, a reality defined in the interest of this project as the space between subject and object, between image and person. One reality is but an endless number of possibilities that range from the purely theoretical to the strictly phenomenological. Ultimately, the function of the space I am proposing in my work is to allow the production of the other as ICEVORG, the conceptual creature that goes beyond avatar and cyborg using the spaces opened in between texts. This opened space is medium as well as form, a concept that transgresses

both worlds, both realities, that of the physical body and the mental construct where identity finds the notion of self as other.

In his book *Screened-Out*, Baudrillard (2002) argues that with the arrival of modernity, we entered what he calls "the age of production of the Other" (p. 51). He uses the "age of production" to refer to a new form of identity construction facilitated by means of the production and the reproducibility of originals, ad infinitum. When he refers to the notion of the Other, he talks more specifically about "otherness" as the psychological projection of the Self developing an awareness of the lack of individuality in a society where we are fed the same media. We aim to produce the "Other" as a form of resistance to what is perceived as an imprisonment to the symbolic value of the image. Pawllet (2010), with regard to Baudrillard's Otherness, suggests that with the technology of cloning, the separation, the confinement and control of reproduction images' deaths can finally be eliminated. Pallet argues that, for Baudrillard, through the endless reproduction of the image the "individual is reduced to his abstract and genetic formula to be "nothing more than a message" (p. 46). We have entered a time in the history of humanity when meaning is abstracted from the production of Otherness, and the person as a single irreproducible entity has been destroyed. We are no longer limited to existing in a single space in a single time. The evolution of media from a cool to hot medium has dismantled the limitations of reality (McLuhan, 1964).

Still, the avatar as representation and medium is equivalent to the space in the eye of the storm, the void, the silence that is surrounded by the spinning force of meaning—of the human fighting against his reflection in the mirror. The avatar is, therefore, a space

outside of the world, but inside of it as well, as Baudrillard (1997) suggests when he describes Otherness. For this project, the avatar is the space in-between and the background that engulfs the image, as well as the image itself. The physical perception of the image is televisual, where the perception of the image becomes an extension of the body. The reflected image becomes virtual reality, and by virtue of this transformation, it escapes the laws of the real world. The image never dies. As Baudrillard argues, it turns into a phantasm, an eternal entity, trapped in what I call the realm of our collective avatar. The realm of our collective avatar is a parallel transgressing reality where avatars never die, for they are images nourished by images. It is a transgressive space where death is not an option because the life of an image has been reduced to its reproduction. In this project, I conceive of Mary Shelley's (1818) monster in *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* as a metaphor for avatars, and as such the concept of avatar has gained a life of its own. We no longer control our avatars; they control us. Avatars, just like the monster, are neither dead nor alive. Pawlett (2010) suggests that death is a form inseparable from life, one which runs parallel to it. Liberation from death is a far more terrifying concept than death itself; liberation does not await us at the end of life, but accompanies us faithfully and implacably within it.

Pawlett (2010) conjectures that clones of the future may well pay for the luxury of dying and becoming mortal once again in simulation, in cyber-death. He explains: "Where previous generations have suffered alienation, future generations face an infinitely worse prospect: the horror of never knowing death" (Pawlett, 2010, p. 55).

"Is this really possible?" I wonder. Perhaps there is nothing beyond theoretical observations. Reality is reality after all, right? But then something terrible happened in my family—an event that will help me illustrate in a much more efficient way the intellectual observations I attempting to construct. It is based on a rather macabre anecdote that Edgar Allan Poe would have loved to transform into a short story: my cousin was murdered by her avatar.

Yes, she passed away. She died young, leaving behind small children. We did not really know each other well, as we lived in different parts of the country. Our experience together was limited to her staying in my house for a few days thirty years ago. However, I knew she grew up, became a physician, got married, and had three kids; or were there two kids? Regardless, all I know is that her image lived in my head more as a referent to her mother—my mother's cousin— rather than as a referent to the woman herself. As a parenthetical note, her image qualifies, in fact, as an avatar. Her image is a referent for the person who was the source of the reflection and the space in between as well—the subject and object combined in the form of an avatar. As I said, she was young, probably in her thirties, married, with a great future ahead. However, as the story goes, her vanity played a trick on her.

She was one of three siblings. Her older brother is a relatively famous plastic surgeon in the coastal city where they live. This aspect is key to understanding the story because the notion of self-image and the preservation of beauty is a rather important cultural constituent of the identity of the people from this particular area of Ecuador. In the same fashion than Venezuelan women have to live under the burden of the cliché of being

"the most beautiful women on the face of the Earth," women from the Ecuadorian coast grow up with a similar cultural construct for developing their individual as well as collective identities. To procure a more beautiful body—from her perspective—my cousin decided to subject her body to plastic surgery. Keep in mind that, as I explained, I am referring to a well-educated, and well-off, young woman with a great future ahead of her. Her mother, my aunt, who is a practicing psychologist, did not approve of her getting breast implants to fulfill her desire to construct this better image of herself. She was not supportive of the notion of her daughter incorporating artifacts, augmentations, between her body and her avatar (visual representation and medium) to construct what I am sure she believed was a projection of a better self. Unfortunately, my cousin would not give up on her desire and convinced her brother, the plastic surgeon, to proceed with the operation without anybody else's knowledge. So he did.

As the story goes, the procedure went as planned. There was nothing significant to report beyond the fact that her parents did not know about the surgery, and that the recovery process had to take place in hiding so they would not find out. At this point, everything becomes sketchy for me. All I know is that there was a problem; some form of virus invaded her body in the operating room. In order to avoid confrontation with her parents, she did not let her brother know about the infection, or her family for that matter. She was a doctor, after all. Unfortunately, before anybody could do anything about it, the infection took over her body, moved to her heart, and she passed away. It was the first real tragedy in the family. It was so nonsensical, so hard to understand, so absurd, so ironic. A tragic story that could have satisfied Poe's hunger for the macabre and inspired me to write

a work of flash fiction that you can find the appendix section. Needless to say, her parents were emotionally devastated, and her brother felt guilty to the core. The loss of life as a result of her need to better the reflected image and her body as a medium meant that they became her own worst enemies.

What I noticed upon her death was that her Facebook® profile page kept receiving endless posts from people publishing messages, "addressing" her as if she were still alive, as if her consciousness had never left. It was then that I realized what was happening that people were having what I believe to be a true and honest dialogue with the avatar of a fallen angel. I do understand that it is a form of demonstrating respect to her relatives, even a nice way of preserving her memory for her children, but were the people visiting her page and writing comments addressed to a dead person correct in doing so? Were they sane? Were they serious? It has been three years since she died, and people still publish on her Facebook wall, addressing their commentaries and salutations as if she would be reading them. Baudrillard's theories are valid! Reality does not exist anymore. Simulation has taken over and avatars only need to be created, fed, and then they take over from there. The avatars we create and craft are immortal.

In Ernest Becker's (1973) Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Denial of Death*, he argues that humans are terrified of their own mortality, and, consequently, avoid the topic. Escaping the inevitable has been a goal of humans throughout history, Becker claims, but, humans never really escape what he describes as "death anxiety," which evolves into forms of representation that attempt to define a more permanent presence in the world. Humans have developed tools ranging from storytelling to virtual reality to evade the existential

reality associated with death. Death and immortality are major recurrent story themes across all media (Blascovich & Bailenson, 2012).

In his article "Ghosts in the Machine: Do the Dead Live on in Facebook?" Stokes (2012) argues that online memorialization and mourning practices somehow license the claim that the dead "live on through their online presence" (p. 363). Moreover, Stokes argues, the online persistence of the dead helps bring into view a deep ontological contradiction implicit in our dealings with its symbolic apprehension. Since we are obliged to redefine what constitutes a body, a person, and a self in the era of virtual reality, identities remain anchored to the medium wherin they had been imprisoned in order to exist. Identity is just like a genie inside a bottle, except that no amount of rubbing the container will bring the inhabitant out into the world; we can merely see, through the relative transparency of the bottle, the power of the spirit trapped inside. The bottle and its transparency are key elements for the construction of the concept of ICEVORG. In the same fashion that our bodies are restricted to the physical world and to abide by its natural laws, avatars inside electronic parallel universes, such as Facebook, must abide by the rules and regulations established by the creators (programmers) to secure a place, and therefore a presence, in that particular realm. "But what happens when the source of that light is extinguished, and when the users behind the online identities die?" Stokes inquires (p. 4). In response to Stokes, Max Kelly, Facebook's head of security, indicates that even though they [Facebook] wanted to be able to model people's relationships on the platform, there is not much they can do when the actual person is not around anymore to be able to log on (Kelly, 2009). Facebook first decided to do nothing, but later on provided an option to

keep profiles as online memorials "allowing other users to post tributes and messages, sometimes speaking of the dead in third person, sometimes in second person" (Stokes, 2007, p. 5).

This is when things become interesting for me as a scholar attempting to understand the construction of identity in today's world. I am fascinated by the interaction that takes place between the undeniable electronic ghost that stays behind once body and mind have ceased to exist, and the related people left behind the threshold of uncertainty involved in the whole process of death.

This is especially interesting in the case of my deceased cousin, whose friends still post messages addressing her as if she would be able to respond. I take this interaction between avatars—Facebook profiles—and living people as proof that reality has broken free from the constraints that were unquestioned before. More importantly, I argue that the naturalization of such interactions between the avatars of the deceased and living human beings inhabiting electronic parallel realities is extremely fragile. These interactions are evidence of the acceptance of a shattered reality where imagination may be the new normal. The resulting hybrid world between fiction and reality can only be realized in the relationship among the medium, avatars, and organic human beings.

In a 2012 article entitled "R.I.P. Remain in Perpetuity. Facebook Memorial Pages," Kern, Forman, and Gil-Egui assert that the relationship between the Facebook profile pages of members who have passed correspond to ritualistic behaviors "akin to behaviors performed at wakes, burials, and cemetery visits. The difference is that these discussions and rituals are public, virtual, eternal, and direct" (p. 3). Kern et al. describe what Ricoeur

(2004) notes as the third level of memory about the dead, which is the dialogue between the mourner and the deceased. They explain,

> Ricoeur argued that memorialization of the deceased occurs within and by the mourner, between members of a group, and between the mourner and the deceased. The dead never really die: but rather are perpetually sustained in a digital state of dialogic limbo. (Kern et al., 2012, p. 2)

Kern et al. (2012) indicate that mourners, through the interaction they have with the avatar of the deceased, remove themselves from the death of the individual, and, as a group, they highlight that which is most important by writing a socio-cultural history of the individual. The authors claim that "the group consciousness recalls individual memories that help to support the constructed social memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Zelizer, 1995), satisfying a need for both the individual and the collective in the remembrance process" (Kern et al., 2012, p. 3). They also indicate that profile pages of the deceased serve the same purpose as tombstones and urn vaults in as much as they provide family and friends a place to visit, to decorate, to turn the place into a shrine in their honor, a public place to have a private dialog with the dead either internally or externally.

Finally, for Ricoeur (2004), there are three spheres where memories exist: the individual, the collective, and a place somewhere in between, "an inter-temporal plane." In his book *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, Ricoeur indicates that the individual and the collective exist in a temporal and historical place, while the inter-temporal sphere includes new narration formed through subconscious dialogues and dream states. These memories are not necessarily based on the facts of a course of events or actual lived experiences;

rather they are fictionalizations created without oneself (Kern et al., 2012). What I find to be the most interesting aspect contributing to the argument I am constructing is the notion of "inter-temporal plane" as a space in between narratives that allows for the formation of parallel worlds, and therefore the possibility of entities, or theoretical constructs, inhabiting said spaces. I contend that a new form of avatar results from the identities we create online. It is rather obvious to understand how the perception of an avatar still reflects and feeds the idea of "presence" in electronic worlds such as Facebook or Whatsapp. Admittedly, accepting the idea that the avatars we create gain a life of their own in the same way that Shelley's (1818) Frankenstein does may be a bit more challenging to grasp.

When Ricoeur's (2004) reflections about the function of memory in relation to the perception of image go further into the depths of semiotics, it all begins to make sense. He argues that memories are images, enigmas, which serve the purpose of presentation and representation, presence and absence at the same time. He explains,

> …[W]hat is there to say of the enigma of an image, of an eikon –to speak Greek with Plato and Aristotle- that offers itself as the presence of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior? (Ricoeur, 2004, p. Xvi)

To elaborate on this concept of what an image is in relationship to memory and how to solve the enigma, Ricoeur borrows the metaphor of the block of wax from Protagoras, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, who was credited by Plato to have invented the professional sophist. He was believed to have created a significant controversy during his time by stating, "Man is the measure of all things," meaning that there is no truth but that which individuals deem to be the truth. Protagoras's metaphor reads:

> Soc: Please assume, then, for the sake of argument, that there is in our souls a block of wax, in one case larger, in another smaller, in one case the wax is purer, in another more impure and harder, in some cases softer, and in some of proper quality.
>
> Theaet: I assume all that.
>
> Soc: Let us, then, say that this is the gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses, and that whenever we wish to remember anything we see or hear or think of in our own minds, we hold this wax under the perceptions and thoughts and imprint them upon it, just as we make impressions form seal rings; and whatever is imprinted we remember and know as long as its image lasts, but whatever is rubbed out or cannot be imprinted we forget and do not know. (North, 1921, p. 187)

He describes the metaphor as a way of representing the challenges posed not only by the way our brains construct memory and forgetfulness, but more importantly how we develop knowledge resulting from the relationship between the brain and the context in which the acquisition of the imprints take place. I argue that Protagora's wax is a medium equivalent to contemporary electronic social media, such as Facebook, or any electronic medium for that matter. We use these media with the purpose of establishing a presence in a territory that belongs more to the realm of imagination than to a physical reality subject to the laws of nature. To declare a territory and to become immortal has always been a constant pursuit throughout human history. Perhaps we have achieved it already thanks to cyberspace, or perhaps it is all an illusion— mere reference to a reality that is no longer accessible, or even worse, a reality that is only accessible to those of us who can wear an avatar as a key

to other dimensions. The time has come to define what I mean by “avatar,” and how the theoretical construct I will present in the following pages is integral to the concept of ICEVORG.

# CHAPTER THREE

## How I Met God's Avatar

As part of my professional teaching experience at Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where I worked for four years as an assistant professor of New Media Arts, I had the opportunity to travel to Europe in January of 2011. I applied to become a mentee under the guidance of Professor Eric Lund who was then director of the college's study abroad program. Professor Lund had conducted a course comparing the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church by lecturing at sites across Europe where relevant events took place. Being a mentee entailed observing a lead lecturer, and his or her way of teaching a course abroad. After I lived that experience, I referred to the study abroad program as "the ultimate Power Point experience."

Aside from the joke, it is important to note that this methodology for teaching eliminates the borders between presentation and representation, which usually raise challenges to classes that are far-removed from the actual locations of the people and places they describe. Approaching education in this way dismantles the gap, mental and real, and allows true knowledge apprehension to take place. That is at least my opinion on teaching. As a matter of fact, I think that is the only way education should be approached and conducted, yet I understand all the constraints that physical reality –let alone economy-- imposes on the education system.

In addition, I had never, as we say in Ecuador, "saltado el charco" before. This expression could be translated as "jump over the puddle," meaning to travel to Europe.

Hence, the experience was unique in every sense of the term, and very memorable. Everything was, to a certain extent, new to me, yet it had the familiarity embedded in travelling that one acquires through experience, that is: standardized airports with overpriced and limited selection of foods, uncomfortable, noisy airplanes that demand one's full trust in airspace technology, and everybody, with the exception of the people who work in the stores, in constant transition and therefore transformation. I was about to engage in the exploration of one reality that I had never experienced before, and I planned to approach it in the best possible way. I decided that the trip I was about to embark upon was going to be part of my research into the pursuit of reality, an intellectual pursuit that would be incorporated in my doctoral dissertation as a phenomenological experience. This pursuit sought to find out how close Europe—as a concept—was to the idea I had formed of it in my head over the years using nothing but media (printed and kinetic). To finally be able to see with my very own eyes images that were, for the most part, represented in books became a magnificent way to test Baudrillard's (1981) theoretical claims on the Real. That is how I came to meet two women who were always near and dear to me: Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Pietà* and Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

From the get go, I traveled with the intention of capturing reality, both metaphorically and literally—or at least a sense of it. The decision to take my digital camera with me was probably one of the most complex decisions I have ever made. I was fully aware that I wanted to capture reality with my sensorium as the main, if not the only, tool for achieving that goal. After three decades of taking photographs, and I am talking about hundreds of thousands of images, I was completely aware that the trip could easily

become an image-hunting trip instead of an experience to add to the "wax" of my mind, as Protagoras theorized. I thought about it, thought again, and again, yet, I could not do it. I could not part with my camera. My decision to take the camera with me resulted in approximately 12,000 images collected over a period of about five weeks. I must say that I did a great job resisting the temptation to turn the experience into an infinite storyboard of my travels in Europe. However, I based my decision, read as "I found a valid excuse," in the reflection that this particular visit to Europe may be the only one that I would be able to experience in my lifetime. This visit ended up not being the only one, as I made it back to Milan in 2014, but that is a different story.

I began the experience in Rome, where I visited historical sites and began conducting phenomenological research by collecting samples of what I considered to be manifestations of something that Baudrillard (1981) claims to be long gone: the order of the Real (as opposed to the Hyperreal). I decided that the best way to approach this search would be to pretend to be an alien, which I am, a legal one, but an alien nonetheless. As an alien, I would collect samples of physical matter, such as objects, that I could put inside plastic bags to document my presence in space (see Appendix B). Not content with this method alone, I also decided to exchange energy with the world I came to experience by using my sensorium, as well as phenomenology, as the means to conduct research for the my dissertation.

In his text *Introduction to Phenomenology*,[11] Sokolowski (2000) describes phenomenology as "the study of human experience and the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experiences" (p. 2). Phenomenology is significant, he argues, because it deals, in a very thoughtful way, with the problem of appearance. The problem of appearance is a problem that may be as old as the history of philosophy itself; that is, when we understand philosophy as the human mind's ability to produce abstract thinking and to project it outside the realm of the body. It may be even more important today because the notion of defining objects according to what they seem to be in the modern electronic era has become a tremendous challenge for philosophers and scholars alike. Appearances have been multiplied and magnified enormously, Sokolowski argues, as they have ventured outside the scope of spoken or written words into the world of new media. Sokolowski explains:

> We generate them [appearances] not only by words spoken or written by one person to another, but by microphones, telephones, movies, and television, as well as by computers and the Internet, and by propaganda and advertising. Modes of presentation and representation proliferate, and fascinating issues arise. (p. 3)

The term "phenomenology" has come to be erroneously considered an approximate synonym for "intention"; however, these two terms should be differentiated inasmuch as the intention of phenomenology entails the act of thinking rather than the act of doing. Intention, for phenomenology, applies primarily to the theory of knowledge, not the theory of human action (Sokolowski, 2000). We have to make the intellectual adjustment and

understand the term as signifying primarily mental or cognitive, and not practical, intentions. “In phenomenology, ‘intending’ means the conscious relationship we have to an object,” he indicates (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 8).

My interpretation of Sokolowski’s (2000) arguments is one that understands phenomenology as the act of constructing the object in my mind, and how it relates to my consciousness through my senses, not how it could be constructed by my memory. It is essentially a “consciousness of” or an “experience of” something or other. All of our awareness is about objects, the construction of experiences of my presence in space and time, and the relationship my body can construct –and does construct- with the physical world. In an attempt to simplify the complexity of such a grandiose theory of perception, I argue that phenomenology could be reduced to the single mantra that states:

> *Consciousness is consciousness of something; consciousness is consciousness of something; consciousness is consciousness of something. Such is illustrated by the fact that by repeating the sentence three times, it becomes an idea in the reader’s mind. Before the iteration of the sentence, the thought had no mental image*.

This reductive mantra assumes that repetition can realize/embody an idea and it is important because it becomes a foundational intellectual construct about human ontology; plus, I find it to be of great importance when analyzed under the lens of history. Sokolowski (2000) describes how crucial it is to understand the concept of intentionality/consciousness from a historic perspective:

> Intentionality and consciousness do need to be asserted, because in the philosophy of the past three hundred of four hundred years, human consciousness and

> experience have come to be understood in a very different way. In the Cartesian, Hobbesian, and Lockean traditions, which dominate our culture, we are told that when we are conscious, we are primarily aware of ourselves or our own ideas. Consciousness is taken to be a bubble or an enclosed cabinet; the mind comes in a box. Impressions and concepts occur in this enclosed space, in this circle of ideas and experiences, and our awareness is directed toward them, not directly toward the things "outside." (p. 9)

Phenomenology argues that consciousness of an object results not only from reasoning and our mental impressions, but more importantly from direct experience with the object itself through our senses. It is rather important to the construction of the theoretical framework for ICEVORG to understand phenomenology as a process of awareness. Said process is rooted in intentionality as an act that includes mental constructions of meaning in conjunction with the experience of the physical world. These two ideas together are of great significance to my dissertation. Throughout the development of my argument, I will continue to reinforce the idea that phenomenology allows us to construct a reality that is not merely an illusion that may disappear inside our minds, but a hybrid construct between what our minds can mentally construct and what our senses perceive in the physical world. I am making use of phenomenology as a tool to grab the world, so to speak, and to analyze the function of ICEVORG as a medium for art-making, one which is rooted in the notion of being "aware of" and/or "being conscious of." As a final remark, in spite of the complications that electronic technology brought us, phenomenology allows us to have a world in common through a reality that may be subject to shared experience.

Put simply, if we do not have a world in common that we can analyze and experience, Sokolowski (2000) argues, we cannot enter into a life of reason, evidence, and truth. We have free license to live our lives as mere individuals capable of turning our mind to our "own private world, and in the practical order we do our own thing: the truth does not make any demands on us" (p. 10). Therefore, I needed to prove that there was a "real" world in Europe, and not just a mere illusion that resulted in the adoption of the phenomenological perspective that I just introduced. I needed evidence. Using a plentiful supply of zip bags that I brought from Minnesota, I began to collect evidence whenever I had a chance. "But, what to collect?" I wondered. I needed to define certain criteria. The evidence had to be something that could not only prove that I was actually in Europe (for the benefit of my project), but also prove to myself that I was really there, too. The answer would come a few days later when my mind cooled off and the jetlag dissipated.

Ever since I set foot in Europe, I decided to exchange energy with the objects I came across. Why? I could argue that it was divine intervention, a Eureka moment of my very own experience, but it wouldn't be true. I preferred to take sides with Thomas, one of the Twelve, the one who was called the Twin, the one who said according to Saint John, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and put my finger into the place from the nails, and put my hands into his side, there is no way I will believe" (John 20:25 King James Version).

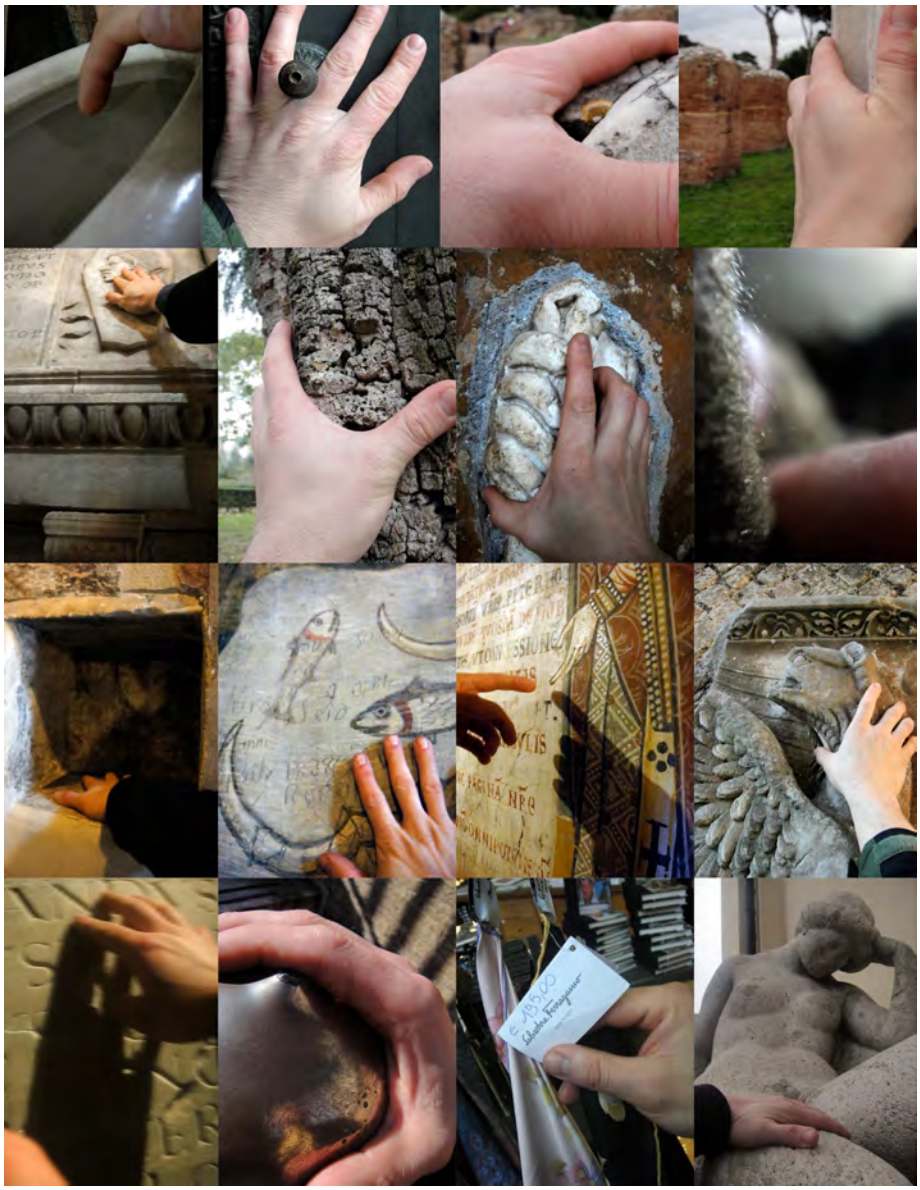

Figure 10: Touching. Documentation of phenomenological research during my trip through Italy, Germany, and France. January 2011. All the images captured by the author.

It took me quite a few days to adjust to Europe. The adjustment was not so much in terms of jetlag or culture shock, but in terms of grasping the idea of standing on the same ground where so many historical figures stood; these are figures who live scattered in my mind as some sort of fuzzy image, though some exist in high definition. I was standing in

the territory lit by the same sun that nourished Roman emperors, popes, artists of the caliber of Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Rubens, Leonardo Da Vinci, even self-proclaimed Christians who were devoured by hungry lions to satisfy the morbid curiosity of the people. I was impressed by the physical fact that I was standing on historical grounds. At some point, I thought I was absorbing too much information at once, and I thought that I would collapse. How am I supposed to be objective while feeling imprisoned by an overloaded sensorium? How am I supposed to find out if Baudrillard (1981) is correct about the Hyperreal in a place where everything seems to be as old as history itself? How am I supposed to tell what is real and what is not in a place like this where everything around the body is perceived as the real thing? How am I supposed to unearth evidence from a place that has not been covered by a better rendering of itself (Baudrillard, 1981)? On the other hand, a place that preserves its original objects –or so it claims-- is the ideal laboratory to better understand what phenomenology is all about, and how it informs and shapes the theoretical construct I am calling ICEVORG. It is quite reasonable to suggest that the places I visited contained primary sources to be perceived with a phenomenological approach and under the theoretical notion that I stood before real objects.

The phenomenological movement fits the twentieth century like an old glove. The work that is generally considered to be "true" phenomenological work was developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859 –1938). The specific work that established Husserl as a key player in the history of philosophy was his copious seminal text, *Logical Investigations*, which was split into two volumes (Sokolowski, 2000). In interpreting

Husserl, Sokolowski indicates that phenomenology is "the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience" (p. 2). Phenomenology is particularly influential for my work because it handles the problem and importance of appearance in regards to extensive technological dissemination of images and words. Everything seems to become pure appearance in today's world of mediated communication. Sokolowski elaborates upon his interpretation of phenomenology by formulating the problem of appearance according to three themes: 1) parts and wholes, 2) identity, and 3) presence and absence. I will elaborate on these three components further into the text, but I must first make sure the notion of phenomenology is well understood, as said concept is vitally important to understand ICEVORG.

The term "phenomenology" is a compound of the Greek words *phainomenon* and *logos*. It refers to the action of giving meaning (*logos*) to various phenomena and the ways in which things appear. "Phenomena" here refers to the elements present in any given context that can be grasped by the sensorium to become part of our consciousness. In other words, phenomena are the information that travels from our sensory apparatus to our brain, where they become intentionality (Cerbone, 2006; Sokolowski, 2000).

In his book *Understanding Phenomenology*, Cerbone (2006) explains that phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which things show up or are manifested to us, and with the shape and structure of the manifestation. Perception, he explains, is "a form of manifestation but not the only one," yet the forms of manifestation are neither arbitrary nor idiosyncratic; rather they are "essential structures, irrespective of whatever

the causal underpinnings of experience turn out to be… these structures must be delineated in such a way that are themselves made manifest in experience" (p. 7).

For Husserl (1913), phenomenology may be reduced to intentionality, once again understanding intentionality as the capacity of the human brain to connect direct inferences to the experience of an object and to derive meaning from those experiences. However, we do not only refer to objects that are in our immediate presence. When we talk or refer to something that is absent, we are talking about the image constructed in our mind of an object that has previously established a sensory experience. Human thinking is such that it transcends the present and conjures the absent—what is not there yet exists in our mind. That is one of the reasons why understanding phenomenology becomes a more complex and challenging task. For Sokolowski (2000), in phenomenology there are seven different kinds of absence corresponding to concepts that intentionality can take on: 1.) the absence of the other side of things we perceive, 2.) the absence of things meant only through words, 3.) the absence of things being remembered, 4.)the absence of things only depicted, 5.) the absence of those "who are far away as opposed to the absence of those who have died," (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 8), 6.) the absence of the past and of the future, and 7.) the absence of the divine.

The disparity between the actual object, and the possibility of assigning inferences or referential meaning to the experiences of said objects, is what creates a problem in understanding media today. Yet, that same fuzzy territory is also the precise one that allows ICEVORG to become a valid conceptual proposal. I find the fuzzy spaces existing in between structures, the spaces through which fiction invades the space of reality and

reality of fiction, the most interesting location for examination. Both accounts of the construction of signification require a structural framework, as Sokolowski (2000) indicates. For him, there are three structures that appear constantly in phenomenological analysis. As he explains, "If we are aware of these forms, it will be easier to understand what is going on in a particular passage or the development of a particular theme" (p. 22). The first form is the relationship between the parts and the whole; the second form is the structure of identity in a manifold; and the third form is the structure of presence and absence. "The three are interrelated but they cannot be reduced to one another," he explains (p. 22). In other words, to analyze an idea, theory, or experience under the scrutiny of phenomenology, one must understand that the three structures are self-contained. Just like a Swiss army knife, it is the object that exists and contains the whole, the parts, and its identity as such, including the name, the way we sound it, and the mental image resulting from the combination of all the structures once they have been captured and experienced by the senses. Without touching, using, or even cutting yourself with a Swiss army knife, phenomenological analysis of what constitutes a Swiss army knife is simply impossible.

Understanding Europe from the perspective of phenomenology would not have been possible without my adventures through the streets, cafes, and museums, and the sounds, scents, and images I perceived in all those places. Evidently, this perspective invites a very big question in terms of what reality is today when we are able to "know" Europe, or Israel, or the North Pole, or the moon by immersive virtual reality, new and electronic media, the Internet, and social networks. Therefore, in order for me to turn my

exploration of the places I traveled through Europe into reality, I needed to touch, smell, see, taste, and hear reality. Still, the challenge of capturing reality became an even more daunting task. How should I collect evidence—real hardcore evidence—of my presence in these new realities? I decided to do two things: first, to touch "reality" in terms of objects, to smell elements, and to activate my senses (as many as I could) in order to experience Europe through a phenomenological lens. Second, content, but not fully satisfied, with my approach, I focused on collecting a piece of evidence that was a container in its own right. I found the answer I was looking for in DNA.

By placing my hands on objects that were centuries old and activating the sense of touch, I became aware that I was indeed exchanging thermodynamic energy. The energy that my body generates when touching the physical object I selected as evidence tries to find a thermodynamic balance. The sense of touch detects forces that stimulate the body's surface, which in turn activate mechanosensory cell types to tune in and respond selectively to stimuli, such as vibration, stretch, and pressure. The sensing of force is fundamental to the development and survival of multicellular organisms. The forces applied to the skin are encoded by touch receptors. The function of touch is likewise essential for coping with behaviors that range from avoiding bodily harm to social exchange (Lumpkin, Marshall, & Nelson, 2010). For instance, touch receptors in our fingertips are important for the fine tactile acuity required to manipulate objects with high precision. More importantly, the sense of touch does not begin and end on the fingertips, but extends to the whole surface of the body.

The sense of touch functions whenever people take hold of something and move it in some fashion. For example, it functions when one lifts a phone to grab it from one of the pockets in a pair of pants, or when one operates one of the exercise machines found in the *Cathedral of Simulacra*. Sense of touch is even at work when one is playing with a Microsoft® Kinetic[12] Xbox 360® game console, wherein one becomes the literal embodiment of the controlling device—an action that apparently removes the mediating agent, but in reality only removes the physical structure, as it is reinterpreted by the use of infrared light invisible to the naked eye. Touch, one could argue, is an extension of sight, a non-visual impression of spatial dimension and certainly of physical existence in space and time (Turvey, 1996). According to Turvey (1996), this kind of touch is referred to as "dynamic touch" or "kinesthetic touch" (p. 1134). What sets dynamic or kinesthetic touch apart from other forms of touch, he argues, is the prominent contribution of muscular effort and its sensory consequences. When touching does not take place and we are forced to determine the existence of an object by only relying on our sight, we have to deal with a different set of challenges. Size constancy for instance, Turvey explains, is an ancient and essentially unsolved problem in the psychology of perception:

> How can people see that an object is of the same size when they change their viewing distance relative to the object? The problem is thought to be created by a mismatch between the size of the object and the size of something else that the perceiver uses in order to perceive objects. The

[12] Kinect is a motion-sensing input device by Microsoft for the Xbox 360 video game console based around a webcam-style add-on peripheral. It enables users to control and interact with the Xbox 360 without the need to touch a game controller.

> something is the retinal image. As an object recedes, its retinal image shrinks. The most common solution supposes a mental computation in which perceived image size is multiplied by a perceptual measure of distance to obtain the object's actual size (e.g., Epstein, 1982; Kilpatrick & Ittleson, 1953). Many years of experimentation have found that visual size constancy is inexact, becoming worse with increasing distance. (p. 1141)

In other words, the further one stands from the object the more challenging it would be to estimate the length of it by sight, let alone attempt a phenomenological investigation of any object under these circumstances. This *inexactitude*, to use one of Baudrillard's (1980) favorite terms, is particularly important as it pertains to the theoretical framework for ICEVORG. I will argue that it is the gap between sensory apprehension of the Real world and the way we visually perceive it in our minds that provides fertile ground for ICEVORG to take place and transgress boundaries through metalepsis or the strange loop.

In addition, it is particularly interesting to note that in the same fashion there is a gap between the perceived length of an object and its physical extension when it comes to how heavy we perceive an object to be as opposed to its actual physical weight. Weight refers to "the force with which an object is pulled earthward" (Turvey, 2006, p.1141.) Turvey (2006) elaborates by stating that Ernst Weber (1834-1978) determined what came to be known as the first quantitative law in psychology, which was based on perceived heaviness. In other words, an object's perceived weight is dependent upon the size and mass of it as captured by sight rather than the weight sensed by lifting the object. According to Webster, that discovery laid the foundation for what is today referred to as

"psychophysics," and marked a fundamental shift in the field of psychology by the middle of the 19th century.

In 1891, the French physician Augustin Charpentier confirmed Weber's argument when he proved that larger objects of the same weight are perceived as lighter. To illustrate the disparity, imagine a large box that when compared to a smaller one of the same mass is perceived by the brain as if it would be lighter. This phenomenon is called "the size-weight illusion," and can be observed with other aspects as well, for instance with color; a metal container is perceived as lighter than wooden containers of the same size and mass, and darker objects feel lighter than brighter objects of the same size and mass (Camp, 1917). Finally, Turvey (2006) explains that the brain's commands for force, which are needed to move objects, are used in a "mental procedure that reveals a mismatch between the forces expected to be appropriate and those that are actually needed" (p. 1142). In a more down-to-earth description, anyone can recall lifting something that one thinks is heavy, yet upon exercising excessive force, one finds out that the brain was wrong in its appreciation, resulting in an excessive amount of force put into one's muscles. Such misjudgment ultimately generates the "whoops" expression that usually happens in these cases. Most dramatically, Turvey argues, these anticipations in our mental mechanisms that combine predetermined experiences of correct-false expectations are very different from "the understanding that the perceptions one gets through dynamic touch and unique functions of mechanical stimulation" (p. 1143). Put differently, the argument is that we cannot go through life using only our sensory apparatus in spite its ability to connect us with what we construct as the Real.

In summarizing the previous pages, I argue in favor of the use of touch as a sense that allows us an enhanced, more accurate apprehension of the world, which thus allows for the construction of what we perceive as "reality." This is also how I usually explain to my design students why we feel the urge to touch an object, even though the linguistic expression to request such an action is "Can I see?" In fact, we make this request as we stand extending our hand, expecting to grasp the object to determine its Cartesian existence in time and space. To touch, I argue, is to accept the existential reality of an object and to bestow the object the potential for carrying meaning. As I will elaborate later his observation is fundamental to understanding one of the conceptual constituents of an ICEVORG, and the role of this seemingly secondary principle (since we take touch for granted) becomes important to validate and accept today's electronic technology as integral to the fabric of reality.

Based on the fact that I wanted to experience Europe using a phenomenological approach, as soon as our trip began, I decided to touch, smell, taste, and hear everything that seemed to me to be real. This was especially true for those instances where I could verify –though it was remarkably difficult to rely on the tour guides-= the authenticity of the objects we were directed to see and/or to admire (see Figure 10). Among the students who joined the course, I quickly became the "weird art prof" who hugs trees and collects rocks, dust, leaves, and seeds. I was the "weird art prof" who did these things in addition to maintaining a constant flow of digital captures and drawings in a notebook I took with me to represent my "blank slate." Interestingly enough, I made a key observation in the construction of ICEVORG inside a crowded Sistine Chapel surrounded by guards who

relentlessly repeated, "NO PHOTO!!! NO PHOTO!!! NO PHOTO!!!" The corridor leading to the Sistine Chapel was basically the entrance to the secret cave of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, as described in the world-renowned work of fiction *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the story, the character Ali Baba[13] discovers, by mere coincidence, the secret words necessary to access the cave where loot is stored. As described in the tale, upon paying the sixteen-euro fee that will "open sesame" the place, I walked inside the cave and found myself appalled when I encountered such an enormous pillage blessed by the Holy Catholic Church in the name of their Almighty. The first thing I noticed was…everything! Even though the place was well-kept and well-organized, the amount of artwork, overpriced souvenirs, brochures announcing promotions and sales, and people—so many people—created a flood of information to my sensorium. People were taking pictures in spite of the constant warning—pictures ad nauseam! Everybody was moving with the urgency of paranoiac squirrels with too much caffeine. Everyone felt the urge to capture every special shot to nourish their gargantuan digital collections, never be seen again by human life, yet treasured as undeniable proof of their visit to the headquarters of Alighieri's Heaven (pun intended).

There was a moment when I got so upset by the situation that I seriously thought about addressing a letter to the Vatican suggesting that no cameras should be allowed inside the space so the experience could be a bit more solemn, more respectful, and more

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[13] Ali Baba (Arabic: علي بابا ʿAlī Bābā ) is a character from medieval Arabic literature. He is described in the adventure tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (علي بابا والأربعون لص).

memorable. It was God's territory after all. I did not address the Vatican. Writing this correspondence remains a task on my never-ending to-do-list since I left God's golden prison. Was I the only one having difficulties absorbing it all? Was my ADHD playing a major role in terms of how overwhelmed I was feeling? I therefore began to wonder how my brain worked when it was subjected to an overexposure of that level.

The sensorium is defined as the sensory apparatus or faculties considered as a whole. In his audio lecture series entitled *Philosophy of Mind: Brains, Consciousness, and Thinking Machines*, Grim (2008) explains that the function of the sensorium is to capture what he describes as "sense-data," or raw information from the environment. Sense data, he explains, contain no meaning; each unit of sense datum exists not as a material object, but as a sense impression perceived by one or more of our senses. As explained in the SEP: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2004), sense data are the alleged mind-dependent objects that we are directly aware of when we perceive them, and that have exactly the properties they appear to have. This notion is relevant to my project insofar as I argue that the idea of sense data, or raw data, is directly related to the idea of using phenomenology to make sense, to understand, and to ultimately construct the reality we choose to experience on a daily basis. Many philosophers reject the notion of sense data, claiming that perception gives us direct awareness of physical phenomena rather than "mere mental images." However, when I use the term "sense data" for developing the concept of ICEVORG, I must say that I abide by the standard definition of sense data, which defines it as a sense impression, or a stimulus to one or more of the senses that is imbued by the following characteristics:

1) Sense data are the kind of thing we are directly aware of in perception;
2) Sense data are dependent upon the mind;
3) Sense data have properties that perceptually appear to us.

According to the SEP, there is consensus in the world of philosophy when it comes to accepting that perception "makes us aware of something." Whether that something is translated into direct or indirect awareness, however, continues to be debated among scholars (Jackson, 1977). Sense data make us aware of something by means of sensory stimulation. In order to be able to codify and decode the sensory input we receive, we need a mind to do it in the same way a car needs an engine to be able to convert gasoline into energy, and subsequently motion. Things cannot exist unperceived. Intellectually grasping the concept of "existence" in tandem with that of "awareness" is key to understanding the concept of ICEVORG. To summarize, what I identify as sense data is strictly in alignment with the definitions put forth by the SEP (2011), which states that sense data are also sometimes called: "mental images," "ideas," "impressions," "appearances," or "percepts." The SEP also claims that sense data refer to the properties that perceptually appear to us as qualities that an object possesses that make it such. As exemplified in the following: "If I perceive a tomato, and it looks red and round to me, then redness and roundness are properties that perceptually appear to me" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011, para. 4). This holds true, according to philosophy, even if the sense datum is the result of an optical illusion as a byproduct of a chemically induced hallucination, in which case I would be experiencing a tomato-like sense datum.

As an introductory note disguised as marginalia, I must add that for the purpose of this study, there are two schools of thought regarding how sense data are theoretically constructed. I will simplify them here and further elaborate on them as the discourse of my project moves into the construction of its theoretical framework. For the purpose of my investigation, and for further development of this project, I accept the concept of sense data as existing "whenever a person perceives anything by any of the senses, and also whenever a person has an experience qualitatively like perceived, such as hallucination" (Huemer, 2011, para. 1). This stands in contrast to what other philosophic perspectives describe as the impossibility of existence of sense data—a school of thought called "direct realism," and one which denies the validity of sense data on the grounds that perception is limited to the sensorium being directly aware of physical phenomena and only physical phenomena (Dancy, 1995; McDowell, 1994). To embrace the idea of sense data as units of sensory stimulation that can be constructed in the physical as well as mental world is fundamental to my argument.

Regardless of whether sense data are seen as mental constructs, physical manifestations only, or something in between, what is undeniable is the necessity of the sensory apparatus to process the external input that our consciousness is constantly receiving. Considering that the sensory apparatus is made out of organic matter in constant transformation, it is capable of failure, exhaustion, and certainly overstimulation. Macaluso (2010) explains that every day, our brain is bombarded with a multitude of sensory signals. Some of these signals are relevant and require in-depth processing, while others need filtering. Selection and filtering operations are two main functions of the attention control

system. Macaluso then explains how the brain determines the value, so to speak, of any input (sense data), and defines how much attention for processing the information is given at any moment. Using the filtering process, our consciousness then can define goals for taking action involving a specific behavior (Desimone & Duncan, 1995; Kastener & Ungerleider, 2001).

According to Macaluso (2010), our motor systems generally operate toward one spatial location a time: "We can direct our gaze toward a single position at a time, and we typically reach out to grasp an object at a single position at a time (or maximum two, for bimanual reaching" (p. 283). Imagine a counter on any given bar where two objects, a glass of red wine and a bottle of beer, are placed on top. What Macaluso indicates is basically that one cannot see the glass of red, desire to take a sip, and reach for the bottle the beer sitting ten inches away from the glass of wine. However, what is more important to understand in this particular context is how both elements, the glass of wine and the bottle of beer, are perceived in a phenomenological way. From the perspective mentioned before, both elements are units of sense data that can be experienced by the brain only when they are grasped. By virtue of not touching the bottle of beer but the glass of wine, the "real" phenomenological experience is only realized with the wine, while the sense data coming from the bottle of beer remains in a world of abstract thinking. In other words, to have a phenomenological experience, one must use the senses to activate meaning. It is very important to recognize the existence of the space between the phenomenological experience and the way our abstract thinking capabilities construct the notion of the experience. Not only does phenomenological experience exist in the space in between, it is

also capable of activating responses in the brain in the same fashion it would when the sensory apparatus is put to use.

Comparing my experiences between the initial approach to the Sistine Chapel and the subsequent one, I walked through the Vatican with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections on space, perception, and phenomenology, as they are found in his seminal work *The Primacy of Perception* (1964). Merleau-Ponty speaks of the importance of the structure of events, and the peculiarities of scenarios where the perception of a work of art is constructed by the brain. He argues that a work of art changes the light of the field where it appears, and by virtue of this, it opens a dialogue between space and object.

> It changes itself and becomes what follows; the interminable reinterpretations to which it is legitimately susceptible change it only in itself. And if the historian unearths beneath its manifest content the surplus and thickness of meaning, the texture which held the promise of a long history, this active manner of being, then, this possibility he unveils in the work, this monogram he finds there—all the grounds for a philosophical meditation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 179)

The main purpose of my visit to Vatican City is to encounter the potential philosophical meditation Merleau-Ponty (1964) describes, and as I walk toward the iconic heart of the building, the Sistine Chapel, all I can do is fight against my own need to touch the artwork, smell it, even taste it. However, everything is crowded with art, and sensory overload quickly takes over. At that point, I wonder how the electronic input coming from hundreds of cameras being activated by the push of a button affect the functioning of my brain. So

many pieces of the very best artistic objects ever made by our species stand before me. Are they real? It would be reasonable to argue that we assume that reality is presented to our senses by default. It is exactly what Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains when he argues that one needs only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it. Remember the glass of wine and the bottle of beer? Even if one does not know how such complex processing of the internal machine takes place at the level of the nervous system, he says "We only see what we look at" (p.162), and we see by the movement of our bodies oriented in space. By assimilating what we look at, and the way our bodies interpret the space where they are located, we construct the world, the Real, in time and space. As we move, so does our reality. As Merleau-Ponty (1964) explains:

> In principle all my changes of place figure in a corner of my landscape; they are recorded on the map of the visible. Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the "I can." Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being. (p. 163)

However, as I walk towards the Sistine Chapel, those objects and spaces that I see are indeed within my reading distance; that is, within the distance from which my eyes are capable of perceiving. On the other hand, the tension created by social expectations and the context of a place filled with artwork, in addition to my desire to experience life using more than my sight (I want to touch everything), becomes almost unbearable. What to do? How do I resolve this internal debate? How can I attest to what I am seeing as real when I

cannot reach out and touch the matter around me? Do I have to settle for capturing the image of what I am seeing? Do I capture the image even though this act will put me even further away from the possibility of touching the work of art, smelling it, experiencing it as sense data from the perspective of phenomenology? Do I have to push myself into accepting sense data as a mental construct? In the midst of my brainstorm, I finally arrived. I walked inside the Sistine Chapel ready to meet Michelangelo's God and to meet God as Michelangelo.

Published in 1910, a text titled *The Sistine Chapel*, written by Paul Schubring, describes the place as disappointing in terms of what one would expect from the Pope's private chapel. The simplicity of its interior is "faintly lit and almost lusterless" (p. 7) he writes, no pillars, no gold, bronzes, marble but sparingly used, and only the pavement showing a pattern of colored stones rich in the difference of its material. From the perspective of this place where the Pope and his cardinals have celebrated countless church festivals, and where new Popes become elected, it is hard to understand the restraint associated with the place Schubring describes as "where we, more than anywhere else, might expect a manifestation of Papal power" (p. 7). I certainly agree with his observation. Perhaps I should argue that there is a similar disconnect between the glare simulated by contemporary media and the actual physical place. Yet, my scholarly intention of my work is not an attempt to describe or analyze the Sistine Chapel, but rather to provide an account of my phenomenological experience with it.

To make what could be a very long story short, let's fast forward to the point where I am standing inside the Chapel, right underneath one of Michelangelo's revered

masterpieces, overwhelmed (again) by the number of people attempting to take pictures of everything[14]. A river of people kept flowing, running really, just like whitewater hitting stones down the stream, through the space. I don't know where to look, and I am quite interested in the human megaphones who keep a constant flow of "no photo" directives coming out of their mouths using an obvious Italian accent. The place is crowded with images, and Eric Lund, the leading professor of the course, is trying to lecture a group of about fifteen students about the chapel amidst the chaos. I keep looking for the icon I am here for: Michelangelo's depiction of God reaching out to touch Adam's hand. Where is it? The place, for a second, stops feeling sublime as it quickly shifts to hell on earth, or at least a sneak preview of it. I keep looking for it, but it is nowhere to be found, nowhere. To doubt for a second was enough to face complete failure. I said to myself this is not the Sistine Chapel containing the painting that I have seen at least one billion times in several different media. This cannot be it. I kept walking in complete certainty that the Sistine Chapel must be right beyond the doors at the end of that huge, crowded, noisy room. I walked through, and by the time I realized the reality of my mistake, I was out of the chapel. The space became modern as if I defeated time. I was facing the souvenir store and Vatican City's post office. Seriously? Really? Really? Really? "God is playing a trick on me," I said to myself. I lost my chance to see "His" hand reaching Adam, yet I was surrounded by representations of it all over the place. Did this really just happen to me? Yes, it did. I found myself standing in front of books, postcards, t-shirts, key chains, candy, posters, and every possible form of paraphernalia. Here were hundreds of representations

[14] These are people just waiting to be persuaded through the tacit aural sign of "NO PHOTO" as it is repeated over and over by several guards.

of the Real thing, endless signifiers of the signified itself. I couldn't believe my eyes. I missed God. What a metaphor for life. In fact, oh my God, I missed the hand of both Gods: Michelangelo and his Boss.

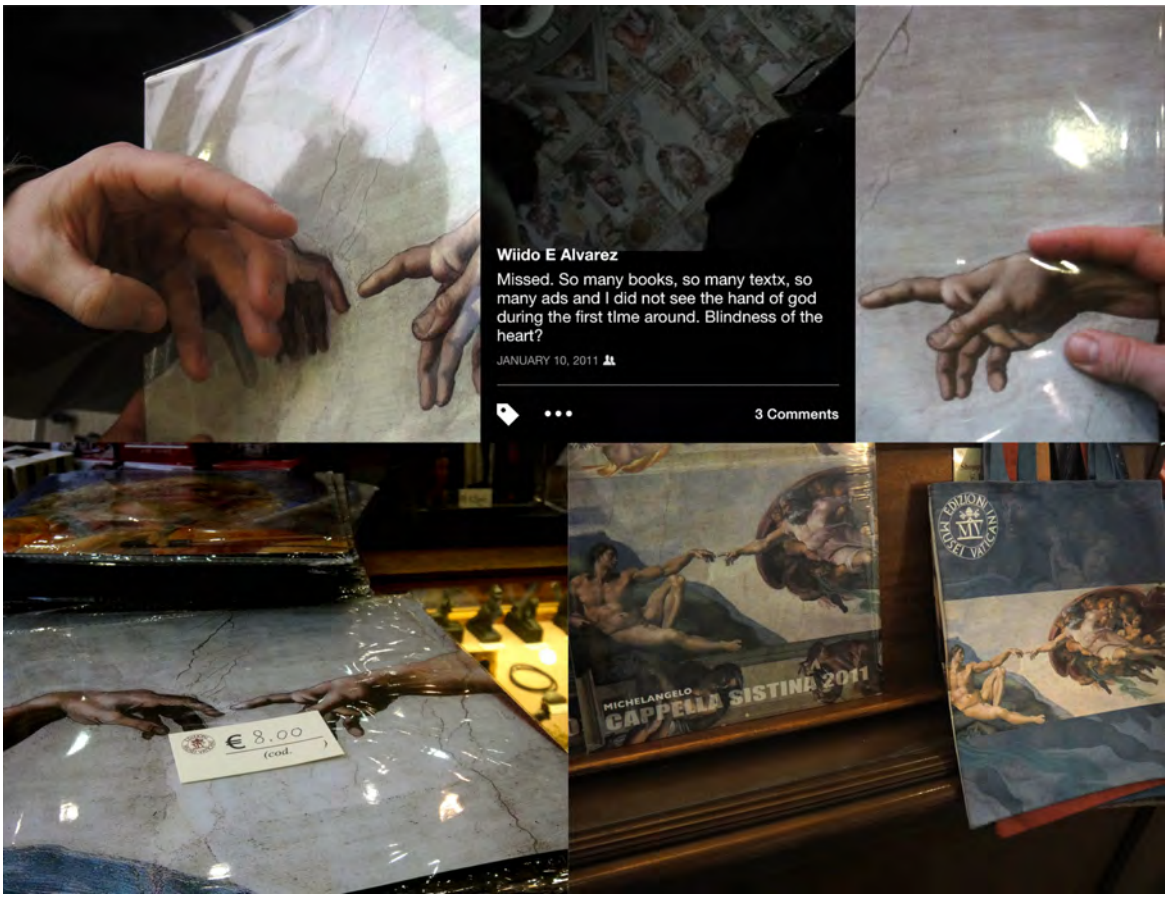


Figure 11: God's finger on print. Several images captured around the gift shop in Vatican City's Postal Office. Images by the author.

Once the awe and frustration of my experience diluted, I bought an overpriced postcard (above) and shipped it to my kids, telling them that I love them from the headquarters of the Almighty. I shipped another copy to myself, writing on this one a summary of the unique event just described. To this day, I treasure this unique memento that reminds me of the Sistine Chapel, and the beautiful metaphor that I was gifted by life.

I was still confused though, confused to the extent that I got lost from my group, so I wandered by myself.

Once again, without meaning to, I made a startling discovery. I found another one of Michelangelo's avatars: *The Pietà*, although, it was not the real deal but its avatar. I will return to this story in the following pages. First, let us go back into the corridor and walk again towards the Sistine Chapel. Yes! For a second time, I found my way into the river of people flowing towards the chapel. I was not going to miss it again. God was giving this poor creature a second chance to make peace with himself. I was raised Catholic, after all; hence "I must have some form of advantage over other tourists," I thought. Consequently, I found myself in what I then knew to be the Sistine Chapel. It was the same space and the same chaos, but on this occasion my brain had the right set of expectations and informed my body to move through the space looking for images in the midst of a sea of paintings. The painting I was looking to experience was not an Imax®-sized one as I expected it to be, but one of the hundreds of paintings overpowering the architecture of the chapel. Why? Why so many? Was it a matter of politics? What was going on?

According to Clements (1961) the painters of Siena incorporated a guild where they declared themselves to be "the instructors of the uncouth and the illiterate" (p. 80). At the same time, the Second Council of Nicaea[15] allowed the use pictures in churches, but stipulated that the compositions of the pictures should not be the invention of the artist, but should follow the rules and traditions of the Church. From my perspective of designer and art educator, I must add that this particular detail is of extreme importance, as one could

[15] It met in AD 787 in Nicaea to restore the use and veneration of icons (or, holy images), which had been suppressed by imperial edict inside the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Leo III (717–741).

argue that churches were not only places devoted to sacred rituals of veneration, but, more importantly, they were thresholds to Heaven as constructed by the Church. Churches, temples, and cathedrals were meant to function as effective pedagogical tools to educate the masses about the virtues and punishments expressed in the Holy Bible. In Clements' (1960) words, "Even in Michelangelo's time, almost everyone who saw his Sistine Chapel paintings considered them automatically as sermons in pigment rather than creations of beauty divorced from didactic purpose" (p. 80).

When I read Clements's words in tandem with my very own experience of the artwork housed in churches, I cannot avoid thinking about a possible equivalent in today's terms for laymen, or the "uncouth and illiterate," who have become a seamless unit with electronic means of visual representation. I observed then and there that IMAX®[16] technology, which reached the public originally as a pedagogic tool, may have carried a more sinister intention, that of depicting one unquestionable reality from a perspective that was only possible when any layman chose to enter an Imax® "temple of science." I am comfortable in claiming that if during an "IMAX® experience," as it is now promoted, an audience member walks out after watching a documentary on the International Space Station, he or she will claim with solid reassurance that what he or she just "experienced" is indeed the truth. The audience member will claim this even though we most likely will never ever have a chance to see the globe from beyond its atmosphere in "real" phenomenological circumstances. The IMAX® illusory experience (or is it?) has already been exceeded by the immersive discourse of 3D moviemaking, not to mention the 3D

[16] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IMAX_Corporation

IMAX® experience. In other words, our current IMAX serves the same purpose of "truth" delivery as the Sistine Chapel was intended to do.

To further support the argument of the Sistine Chapel as a "real" experience, Clements explains that artists used an artistic technique known as "foreshortening," which has no accredited inventor. Foreshortening, to borrow a reductionist definition from the dictionary, is to show an object or view as closer than it is or as having less depth or distance, as an effect of perspective or the angle of vision. In Clements's words, Michelangelo "learned that the faces had to be made proportionally larger as the figures were placed higher, so that the work might appear most proportionate to the eye. Such ease in handling foreshortening resulted from the fact that ancient artists kept their measurements in the eyes" (Clements, 1960. p. 31).

Danto (2001) writes in his article "Seeing and Showing" that the intention behind the technique of foreshortening is to "represent the world the way it looks spontaneously to un-instructed perception. Foreshortening, chiaroscuro, perspective, physiognomy—these were discoveries that enable pictures to look like what they represented" (p. 5).

As Danto (2001) explains, improvements in the representational skills used to get a better representation of reality were from that of the hand rather than from that of the eye. The intention was to leave no room for doubt about the mediation of the Church between earth and the power of God. The representation of images on the walls of churches had to reach such a level of authenticity among people that no one could challenge the notion of a parallel world that belonged to the imagination, one which was a derivative of literary narratives from the book identified as the ultimate truth: the Holy Bible. In other words,

the technique of foreshortening was a major breakthrough in the representation of reality. As Danto (2001) explains,

> If it is right but looks wrong, it is wrong. If it's wrong but looks right, it's right. One has to conclude that foreshortening became central in the six-teenth century and then became an artistic commonplace. Tiepolo, in the late eighteen century, foreshortened effortlessly, since, after all, so many of his commissions were for ceiling decorations: even a drawing by him looks as though seen from below. It had become part of the lingua franca of realistic representation. (p. 6)

In the article "Narration in Motion," Thomson-Jones (2012) argues that the sense of movement used in moving images is best understood as an "experience of imagining moving. This is in light of the fact that we are neither under a felt illusion nor in the grip of a false belief in motion" (p. 33). Our basic ability to distinguish whether it is us or an object before us that moves when we move is what opens the possibility for what Thomson-Jones defines as proprioceptive illusion. The proprioceptive illusion involves projecting one's sense of motion onto the image itself, an illusory sense data that is possible, she argues, in the immersive experience of an IMAX film. She states:

> In a scene filmed by mounting the camera on a speeding car as the car hurtles over a precipice, we may literally feel our chairs tipping forward as our stomachs drop. But without the enormous and enclosing Imax screen, actual sensations of movement may be rare. This may change with the recent development of sophisticated 3-D screening mechanisms. (p. 34)

In relation to my argument, I contend that the experience of visiting the Sistine Chapel was phenomenologically equivalent to what our sensory apparatus can grasp in IMAX® and 3D IMAX® experiences.

On a similar note, Ross (2012) claims that it was James Cameron's 2009 movie *Avatar* that promoted the popularity of this re-emerging enhanced medium. Ross refers to Marks's (2000) work on intercultural cinema wherein Marks theorizes a concept that she defines as "the 'skin' of the screen" that produces narrative modes only in close consideration with the interpretation of the image (Ross, 2012, p. 383).

Marks argues that 3D film technology redefines the space that traditional cinema put in between the screen and the audience. Whereas traditional cinema is, by comparison, equivalent to the technique of perspective developed in the past to render the representation of space, new film projection technologies, such as IMAX or 3D film, invite a more involved sensory response to the film's content. Ross (2012) refers to it as "haptic perception," elaborating that haptic perception is "the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies" (p. 162).[17]

Considering all that I just explained, let me put myself back into my second encounter with the Sistine Chapel. There I am, still a bit overwhelmed by the people, the crowd, the environment, and the endless "no photo" announcements that rain like cats and dogs on this April afternoon. This time, however, I take the time to explore further, visually, and I strive to expand my phenomenological experience of the chapel. At that

[17] See also Barker, J. M. (2009). *The tactile eye: Touch and the cinematic experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

point, I decided to incorporate sounds, smells, and temperature into the experience. It was reality, after all. My eyes scan the walls from bottom to top, from top to side, from side to top. My body walks about and spins. My neck does its job and my eyes keep “grazing” the space, as Marks (2000) would say. I finally find it. It is the rather small painting right above my head. It does make sense, doesn’t it? Where else could God be if not right above my head? I have seen God, and my experience now is a phenomenological one. New sense data had been incorporated into my consciousness as I became fully aware of the image, the space, and the relationship among us. I have not only seen God, but something beyond, something more transcendental: I have seen God’s avatar.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## The Avatar Is the Message

In the previous sections of this study, I briefly explained a few core ideas of what an avatar is. It is now time to go into this concept in depth, and discuss the ontology of avatars and how this construct has evolved as a result of the never-ending progress of electronic communication technology. Having a well-defined understanding of what an avatar is for the construction of the ICEVORG is especially important, as it will help me to explain the role of postmodern art today, and how it is one of the few entry points into experiencing the Real.

In her book *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism*, Weinstone (2004) provides a concise definition of avatar by indicating that the word "avatar" comes from the Sanksrit "avata¯ra," meaning the divine descending so as to assume human or animal form. In mythology, the reason why divine entities reincarnate is to "perform tasks, in order to establish pedagogical relationships with human beings, and as means to experience play in duality" (Weinstone, 2004, p. 118). Weinstone claims that the avatar is a being that participates in human life, yet remains distinct in both an evolutionary and an ontological sense. In Hindu mythology, one of the functions of avatars is to exemplify how to live in this world in order to eventually transcend it. When avatar is described in Tantra[18] or Hindi mysticism, it does not make any distinctions among the human, the material, the animal, the psychic, or the divine, but instead works along syncretic gradations. In Weinstone's words:

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[18] Tantra |ˈtantrə| a Hindu or Buddhist mystical or ritual text, dating from the 6th to the 13th centuries. Adherence to the doctrines or principles of the tantras, involves mantras, meditation, yoga, and ritual.

> [Avatar] works along baroquely conceived gradations from subtle to gross, expanded to contracted, involuted to evoluted, static to kinetic, active to passive. It addresses rituals and practices to a baroque variety of cosmic expressions or manifestations… [T]here never was a "first," nor will there ever be a "last" cosmos, nor will there ever be a period at which the universe will have reached a static phase of total disintegration or total integration. (p. 77)

From this perspective, an avatar is a form of expression that breaks free from the constraints of time and space; one could argue that it is a mere conduit of consciousness among realities. In addition, I must add that Tantric cosmologies, as presented by Weinstone (2004), view reality as an all-inclusive experience that engulfs everything, "including deities, rocks, humans, words, sounds, images, gestures, powers, and personalities, as ontologically related, modal expressions of a single, heterogeneous real" (p. 118). An avatar, under these circumstances, refers to circulating active modalities or expressions of reality that are present everywhere, or have the potential to transgress boundaries that otherwise could not be penetrated due to the limitations imposed by the ontology of a particular medium. The overarching aim of Tantric practice is "to involute expressions such as sound, image, gesture, powers, and personality and in doing so, learn to transit from one modality to another, accessing the intrinsic relatedness of everything" (Weinstone, 2004, p. 118). Accordingly, I argue that an avatar's natural state of being renders it a two-part unity, comprised of medium and message. As such, the avatar provides the appropriate constituents to begin a discussion about its ontology.

In his book *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology*, Nusselder (2009) explains the concept of "avatar" by stating that, in Hinduism, avatars are the incarnation or embodiment of a goddess. However, to move his discourse away from a potential religious interpretation, he continues that avatars are, more importantly, symbolic embodiments of "the changing states someone lives through" (p. 134), "bridges" between dimensions. I am inclined to claim that they are nothing but interpretations of the Real, where bodies cannot exist due to spacial-temporal limitations but avatars can thanks to their ephemeral and ethereal nature.

Avatars are made of thoughts. Nusselder (2009) asserts that a better way to understand what an avatar is involves approaching it from the point of view of a Lacanian ontology. For Lacan (1950), the Real represents a psychological time prior to the symbolic (linguistic) order, and prior to linguistic consciousness—that is, prior to having awareness of language and its potentialities. Lacan contends that language "cuts into the smooth façade of the Real creating divisions or gaps" (Fink, 1995, p. 24). The resulting interstices are the medium where interpretation can take place, and where other forms of symbolic life can thrive. Lacan is "presenting the limits of language and experience as symbolic representation in the face of the Real" (p. 134). It is the symbolic language that is capable of creating an alternative "reality" parallel to that of the physical world. Such a reality results from things that have not previously existed entering the process of symbolization. For Lacan, the Real exists prior to language; it is "that which has not been yet symbolized" (p. 25). Once language has become integrated into our consciousness, then any form of

representation could be defined, in Lacanian terms, as an avatar (Nusselder, 2009). In Nusselder's (2009) own words:

> Both online forms of self-representation ('personae') and (anterior) 'forms' of the self in Lacanian theory (I see myself as…, I think of myself as…, I idealize myself as…) can be considered avatars. We can play with these 'forms', reshape and reform them in virtual space of images and of symbolic codes—which is also the "stuff" of cyber space (remember that Sherry Turkle [1995] draws a parallel between the virtual self of a psychoanalytic session and of online play). An avatar in a virtual world may give a unified form to tendencies otherwise experienced as discordant and disturbing, just as the identification with the virtual image does in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. By picking an avatar, I can formalize certain tendencies (for example eroticism, aggression, animality) that remain otherwise dark and obscure. (p. 91).

Nusselder (2009) then explains that an avatar in a virtual world is equivalent to Lacan's (1950) theory of the mirror stage inasmuch as the process of discovery and identification with the image takes place. The difference between the avatar and the mirror stage, however, is that the avatar goes beyond the physical limitations of reflection. By selecting an avatar as Nusselder just argued, "I can formalize certain tendencies that remain otherwise dark and obscure" (p. 91), thus aligning with Lacan's point that the obscure aspect of the self comes into being in the externalization of it. It is in the avatar, Nusselder elaborates, that one can come to recognize his or her "'unconscious intentions'; they do not exist as such before their 'materialization'. Therefore, the unconscious 'happens' at the

interface" (p. 135). This observation is fundamental to the conceptual framework for ICEVORG. Since the interface, the inter-face, or the space in between, becomes a foundational mental construct. The ICEVORG allows for the interplay among the other components of the theory, with the idea of the "unconscious" becoming the protagonist of my dissertation. I will elaborate more on this idea in the following pages. When comparing these introductory thoughts to Baudrillard's (1981) concept of simulation, it is interesting to observe that the main difference is that, for Baudrillard, there is no limit in interpretation because there is no Real. In revisiting Baudrillard's (1988) words to add to the current discourse, one finds that:

> Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all models around the merest fact – the model comes first, and their orbital (like the bomb) circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events… This anticipation, this precession, this short-circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative electricity or implosion of poles) is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory- all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable, in the image of the models from which they proceed, in a generalized cycle. (p. 175)

In other words, avatars are not only representations of reality, projections of one's self and one's consciousness, but are, following Baudrillard (1988), not models but endless "true" representations of our very selves. I will push even further into the abyss and claim that avatars are only representations of the self, but not the self itself. When I construct an

avatar, it is meant to function as an agent that negotiates my consciousness between realms. In practical terms, I am creating an enhanced clone of my persona.

My mental newborn is a hybrid entity, a mongrel being of a higher order that belongs to multiple dimensions, an intrinsic characteristic that allows it to cross boundaries between dimensions, between realities. In addition, the ontology of an electronic avatar is rooted in the idea of sense data that work in the simultaneity of the dialectic between body and mind. However, what I am proposing in this study is a reconceptualization of the notion of avatar to better accommodate what today's world of electronic communication demands. As an imaginary, yet, creature, the avatar results from one's own interpretation of the self to adapt to a new conception of time and space. In other words, the avatar is capable of crossing boundaries between the Real and the imaginary in a phenomenological way. An avatar is an idea, a theoretical construct; I argue that it is made of nothingness and the void around the nothingness. An avatar today, given the major changes in technology, is no longer a mere bridge between worlds, but an idea that can only exist as long as there is empty space to mediate its permanence in the mind. I want to name the theoretical construct I am proposing ICEVORG, and claim that it is an enhanced form of avatar that adds two key components. Those two crucial components are the medium, and more importantly, the awareness of it. Put differently, what I am proposing is a comprehensive self-cross-referencing notion of avatar as sense data.

When I mentioned in the previous chapter that I met "God's avatar," my intention was to make a point by penetrating the barriers of language. I had to use the expression "pun intended" to signify that what may have been perceived as a syntactical mishap was,

in fact, not one. What I wanted to point out in claiming to have met God's avatar has everything to do with what I am proposing as ICEVORG. Let me go back to the Sistine Chapel, to the moment when I realized the role of the medium in the construction of a multidimensional re-interpretation of what an ICEVORG is.

After I missed looking at God's hand on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel for the first time, I had the opportunity for a second tour with a different mindset, but more importantly, with a different set of emotions as well as a more alert sensorium. Once inside the Sistine Chapel, I looked up and finally found Michelangelo's interpretation of God and Adam extending their hands, reaching out for that "touch" between the mundane and the divine. As I reflected upon that image, I began thinking about the space between those two fingers. The space, or void, in between images was the key factor necessary for creating the tension for the message to come across.

On the other hand, keeping in mind that my intention was to experience the Sistine Chapel from a phenomenological perspective, and considering what I explained before in terms of our innate human desire to "see through touch," my second experience at the Sistine Chapel was a failure as well. "Why was it a failure?" you may wonder. I was, after all, right below the artwork I so badly wanted to experience. Yet, put otherwise, my attempt to meet the Real thing only revealed an unfulfilled relationship between my desire to touch and the impossibility to do so. The tension conjured in my brain, and expressed through the anxiety running through my body, attempted to simulate the experience of touch. The resulting frustration served the purpose of making me aware of the space between intention and desire, void and object, pleasure and pain.

I was able to see the void and grasp the idea of what Baudrillard (1981) describes over and over as the Real—the core conceptual space where Reality beyond simulacra can be experienced.

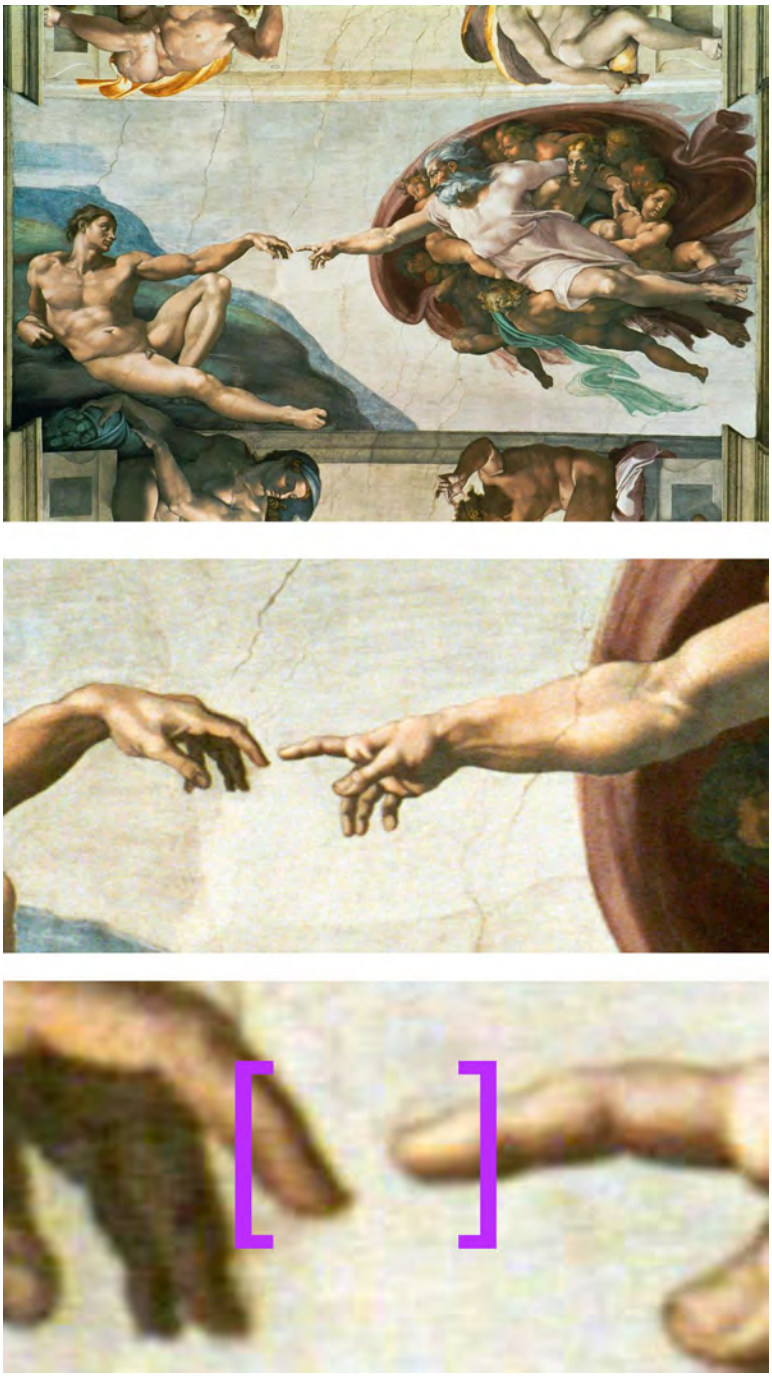

Figure 12. Void Between Gods. Buonarroti Simoni, Michelangelo Di Lodovico. Rome: Sistine Chapel: Ceiling Frescos: Creation of Adam. 1508-1512. Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican City. Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives/ART RESOURCE, N.Y. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. ARTstor Collection. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

Several observations led me to the reflections shared on these pages, namely, feeling cheated by the size or scale of that particular painting. “Really?” I thought to myself. “That’s it? Is that the image that has been reprinted literally billions of times? Is that ordinary image the one that has been the central subject for a never-ending flow of scholarly analysis, advertising, production, reproduction, design and redesign, cultural studies research, gender studies, cultural criticism, art history, religion, philosophy and literature? Is that the single image abducted by scholars from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the universal icon meant to signify the relationship between the Western God and men? It cannot be! It just cannot be.” However, at the same time, I realized that I was not constructing a singular unit of sense data in my head, but rather a spinning swarm of images going in and out of themselves. The rush of images in my head was not unlike the conceptual image of a molecule with electrons orbiting the center. “This was a unit of meaning,” I said to myself, “a unit of consciousness that contained many versions of mediated reality.” To complicate matters, I was beginning to gain full awareness of the fact that I was not allowed to touch the painting. This detail is important, as it helped me to observe and argue that Reality today, Reality beyond Baudrillard’s (1981) simulacra, was non-touch-dependent. Explained in different terms, if I cannot touch what claims to be the Real thing, it is therefore accepted as Real.

Eureka! It was the space in between that made the difference, the nothingness, the emptiness that determines the Real today—that seemingly empty space meant to be visible only to consciousness, yet invisible to the eyes unless we become aware of it. I would then argue that it is the void, the empty space, that mediates our presence in any given physical

or conceptual construct, that constitutes the Real, as opposed to a mere physical stimulation to the sensory apparatus obtained from our physical presence in a Cartesian reality. The real is the void, the absence.

I was experiencing the concept of ICEVORG, an avatar that exists as self-cross-referencing sense data. If I removed the particular panel of artwork known as "The Creation of Adam" from the Sistine Chapel, the experience that one would have of it today will not be phenomenological, for in removing the work, we would remove the conceptual construct behind the work itself. It happened to me, as I explained before. The first time I walked through the Sistine Chapel, I did not see the image, even though I was undeniably present in the place and fully exercising my sensorium. The lack of awareness, in my case, speaks directly to what phenomenology identifies as the "intentional object." Without the mental construction of *The Creation of Adam* as a holistic experience working in tandem with the architectural space, the people observing, all the other elements making the space, and more importantly with the previous knowledge one has been fed by mass media, art history, and media culture, this particular image could not be theorized as an ICEVORG. The image would not be an ICEVORG because it cannot transgress boundaries between realities, as I will later describe.

As I walk deeper into the construction and understanding of ICEVORG, I cannot renounce my very own desire to analyze the concept of ICEVORG under the lens of the powerful, almost archetypical, thoroughly exploited Greek myth of Narcissus. In his essay "The Inventor of Painting," Damisch analyzes (2010) Leon Battista Alberti's writings on the painter, and the role the painter played in the construction of reality in the late fifteenth

and early sixteenth centuries—when Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel. Alberti was an Italian author, artist, architect, poet, priest, linguist, philosopher, and cryptographer who wrote extensively about theories of art in two publications, *Della Pittura* and *De Statua*. It is here where Alberti (1804), argues that "all steps of learning should be sought from nature," and that the "ultimate aim of an artist is to imitate nature" (p. 53), a structuralist definition ahead of its time. Beauty was, as Alberti understood it, "the harmony of all parts in relation to one another" (Spencer, 1956, p. 43). He claims that at the heart of painting, there is a divine power: "tiene in se' la pittura forza divina" and that Art is capable of providing "a semblance of presence to absent beings" (Alberti, 1804, p. 44).

According to Alberti, the work of art, when materialized, cannot be transformed by adding any element or removing anything without impairing the beauty of the whole. Beauty was for Alberti "the harmony of all parts in relation to one another" (p. 54)

For Alberti (1804), "Painting can even endow the face of the dead with a prolonged life" (p. 44). Painting is form capable of making the gods jealous, yet also one that binds us inseparably to them by providing us with a visible image of divinity. It operates in the two dimensions of the planar surface, an observation that demonstrates the ability to break free from the constraints of the medium itself and to be open to multiple interpretations. The fact that painting exists in two dimensions also entails the addition of elements that can be deconstructed and separated into different planes for later analysis, but nonetheless add to the meaning and value of a work of art.

In his article entitled "The Inventor of Painting," Damisch (1995) please include full reference in your bibliography states that the additional elements become part of the

projected surface, and are articulated to one another to give the illusion of a relief, or depth, for instance. The visual construction acquires value only through a kind of transformation or metamorphosis, in relation to the plane on which it is registered. Damisch then references Matisse to argue that the language, the code, is "taking possession of the surface" (p. 305). My reading of Damisch is in favor of the argument of art's dependency on a medium, a medium itself that is transformed by the interrelations taking place among its elements. In other words, art is metamorphosis. It transforms all elements around it: the space, the void, and the viewer. It also transforms its own representational elements. Art also transforms the additional relationships emerging from the intertwined semantics behind all signifiers (Barthes, 1964). I find Damisch's insight into Alberti's theories from the time of the Sistine Chapel of great value to the development of my discourse. Particularly relevant to my dissertation is when, in his analysis of Alberti's writings on Narcissus, Damisch (1995) remarks:

> [F]or Alberti to take note of the power of transformation; even of sublimation –in a word: of metamorphosis-- which is the essence of his art. Here he finds the pretext to a fable unprecedented in the artistic literature and which takes on, in De pictura, the value of an origin myth: 'Consequently I had the habit of telling my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was transformed into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the source?' Narcissus converted into a flower… …It is not only the final metamorphosis of Narcissus which appears relevant here, but also

> the whole fable (omnious fabula), the whole story of Narcissus… in which the hero of the fable discovers, without initially identifying it, the object of his desire, seeing there for a long time only fire. [NOTE: in French n'y voir que du feu – means to be blind to something, to fail to notice something, or to be fooled by it], the same one that burns him; until the moment when, having finally recognized the image for what it is, his own, far from freeing himself from its influence, he sets his desire free and awaits the final metamorphosis… the painting is anything else, in principle, than an artful embrace of the surface, a surface that constitutes the first and inalienable given of painting; its irreducible precondition, and – so to speak – its 'source'? To embrace, to take possession of it (According to the words of Matisse), or even to measure it with two arms… the 'one who looked', was to hold in hand and view in a mirror, and on which was painted the projected image offering an exact replica of its model. (p. 306)

It is interesting to note that in spite of the great number of years separating Damisch and Alberti, Damisch's interpretations on Alberti's theoretical propositions correlate directly to the ICEVORG, especially when he describes how the source where the image is reflected becomes an integral component of the perception of one's self as a whole, as an experience, as the consciousness of something (Heidegger, 1989). Embracing the medium while keeping it invisible to one's consciousness is fundamental to comprehending the ICEVORG. In other words, an ICEVORG is an avatar that has the characteristics of the object of intentionality, as described in phenomenology. As such, an ICEVORG is present

and absent at the same time; it is both idea and object, sense data that can be experienced through the senses without the need of a body other than the one imagined by the observer.

An ICEVORG, I want to add at this point, serves another function: that of a threshold, door, access point, or port of entry into the world of interstices among realities. An ICEVORG is capable of being observed only when it transgresses boundaries—mental, physical, or both. ICEVORG cuts through dimensions to transgress boundaries. An ICEVORG is an image that is not, a body that has none. An ICEVORG, when applied to a person, is a representation of the characteristics of the identity of that person. Additionally, the ICEVORG possesses the capacity for metamorphosis in order to transgress boundaries while maintaining multiple instances inasmuch as the embodiments it can assume and the channels by which it can move. Put differently, an ICEVORG is a conceptual hybrid capable of multiple ontologies.

Moreover, in constructing the conceptual framework where the idea of ICEVORG was born and raised, I must add that it is important to note that the reflecting image on the pond that constitutes the backbone of the Narcissus myth is essentially a found object. The water, that is, is a found conceptual object. As Narcissus finds the image/object, it becomes the object of his desire (Moore, 1994). He wants to possess the image, to make it his own, not because he recognizes the image as his own reflection, but because he perceives it in a phenomenological manner, according to the narrative. The image becomes sense data that correspond to a perceived otherness. The image is not his own but an unknown object that Narcissus cannot reach. When he tries to reach the image, his hand breaks the surface of the pond, dismantling the perceived object. The medium where the sense data is perceived

goes through its own metamorphosis, from invisible yet always present, to temporarily visible and perceivable by the senses. Narcissus's image is, I must stress, a natural found object, not a human-made one.

To further support the notion of ICEVORG as the main character of my current inquiry, I refer to how Mitchell (2005) describes his theory of found objects. Oddly enough, Mitchell suggests that found objects (images) do not have an adequate theory, and "it may be because they haven't felt the need for one" (p. 114). Mitchell then describes the criteria defining a found object: 1) it must be ordinary, unimportant, neglected, and (until its finding) overlooked; it cannot be beautiful, sublime, wonderful, astonishing, or remarkable in any obvious way, or it would have been already singled out, and therefore would not be a good candidate for "finding"; 2) its finding must be accidental, not deliberate or planned.

What I am trying to do here is draw a parallel between the image reflected on the mirror of water in the Narcissus myth, and the reflected image as found object. The found image does comply with Mitchell's (2005) principles in that it is unexpected and overlooked, for the phenomenon of reflection was always there, neglected and unimportant. However, the pond itself was also overlooked, as it was taken for granted. The pond, just like the water that fills it, was always there. It is the combination of image and surface, reflection and awareness of the medium where it takes place, that procures the ideal context for the birth of the ICEVORG. In addition, the conceptual reflection that led me to propose the ICEVORG as a valid theoretical construct was, interestingly enough, also found by accident. It revealed itself to me. Mitchell's words transform my experience

into a more meaningful and relevant one as he elaborates on his theoretical construct of a found object. In his words:

> One doesn't seek the found object, as Picasso famously remarked. One finds it. Even better: it finds you, looking back, looking back at you… The secret of the found object is thus the most intractable kind: it is hidden in plain sight, like Poe's purloined letter. Once found, however, the found object should, as in surrealist practices, become foundational. It may undergo an apotheosis, a transfiguration of the commonplace, a redemption by art. In the readymade, it may take on a new name-the urinal becoming a "fountain." If it really works, however, we have a sneaking suspicion that the transfiguration was a trick, a comic ruse engineered by a deux ex machine; and the plain old thing with its homely, family name is still there, blushing and smirking at us in the spotlight of aesthetic attention, or (better) ignoring us totally. (p. 116)

Here, Mitchell (2005) adequately describes how I came across the notion of ICEVORG as an object that I desired to possess—in this case, via Michelangelo's image and its meaning, despite being unable to reach it not once but twice. From then on, I wanted to have that image, to make it my own, and to be it. However, it was not until I came across another one of Michelangelo's masterpieces that I finally assimilated what the images were saying, what they wanted.

As I walked into Saint Peter's Cathedral, the heart of the Catholic Church, I saw it. I saw her. And she looked back at me. Michelangelo's *The Pietà* was there: sublime, in front of me. It was so delightfully beautiful, so intense, and so inviting to be admired, yet

so far away. I began to feel the urge to see it, to approach it, and embrace the work of art. This piece of art was not that far away, and certainly not elevated above my head (as was the case with *The Creation of Adam*), but the crowd was there, and it was that: a crowd. So, I decided to investigate around the cathedral until I had a better chance of a clear view. While walking outside to get some air (having lost my group again), I found myself in an area of the building where I found another Pietà. This one, however, was sitting in oblivion, alone, almost forgotten, yet perfect as well. I could even touch it and I did. When my eyes scanned for more information, I found the following inscription: (figure xx) Cast of the Pietà by Michelangelo 1475-1584. The original, commissioned of Michelangelo by Cardinal Jean Bilhéres de Lagraulas in 1497 and completed in 1499, is displayed in the Chapel of Pietà in the Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican. The plaster cast was made in 1975 by the Restoration Laboratory of stone and casts of the Vatican Museums. Inv. 50661

It was a copy, a plaster cast. It was a great example of Baudrillard's (1981) metaphor of the territory, and how the map replaces what once was real. Returning to the discussion of what a found object is and what it does, I argue that this object, this Pietà, found me. It was a great point of entry into the theoretical observation that helped me construct and reinforce the concept of the ICEVORG. Along these lines, Mitchell (2004) elaborates upon his theorization of found objects by indicating what a found object is not. In a dialectical reflection, he writes that a found object is an element capable of theoretical analysis:

> [A found object is not] the sought object, the desired object, the sublime or beautiful object, the valued object, the aesthetic object, the produced, consumed, or

exchanged object, the given or taken object, the symbolic object, the feared or hated object, the good or bad object, the lost or vanishing object. These are the special objects singled out for theoretical attention by critical theory and by psychoanalysis. They are the objects we care about in advance, the objects we are looking for, the objects of theory. (p. 116)


Figure 13: Touchable Virgin. Cast of the Pieta by Michelangelo (1475-1564)
Plaster cast made in 1975 by the Restoration Laboratory of
stone and casts of the Vatican Museums. Sitting on an aisle inside the Vatican.
January 2011. All the images captured by the author

The function of a found object is precisely the one that finding this copy of the Pietà served. It helped me observe what was invisible before, yet in front of my eyes. The key observation happened as I walked back to see the "real" Pietà. When I finally arrived to the scene of the crime, so to speak, the crowd had dissipated, and I had a clear view of Michelangelo's masterpiece (below). The popular expression "so near yet so far" became a phenomenological experience.

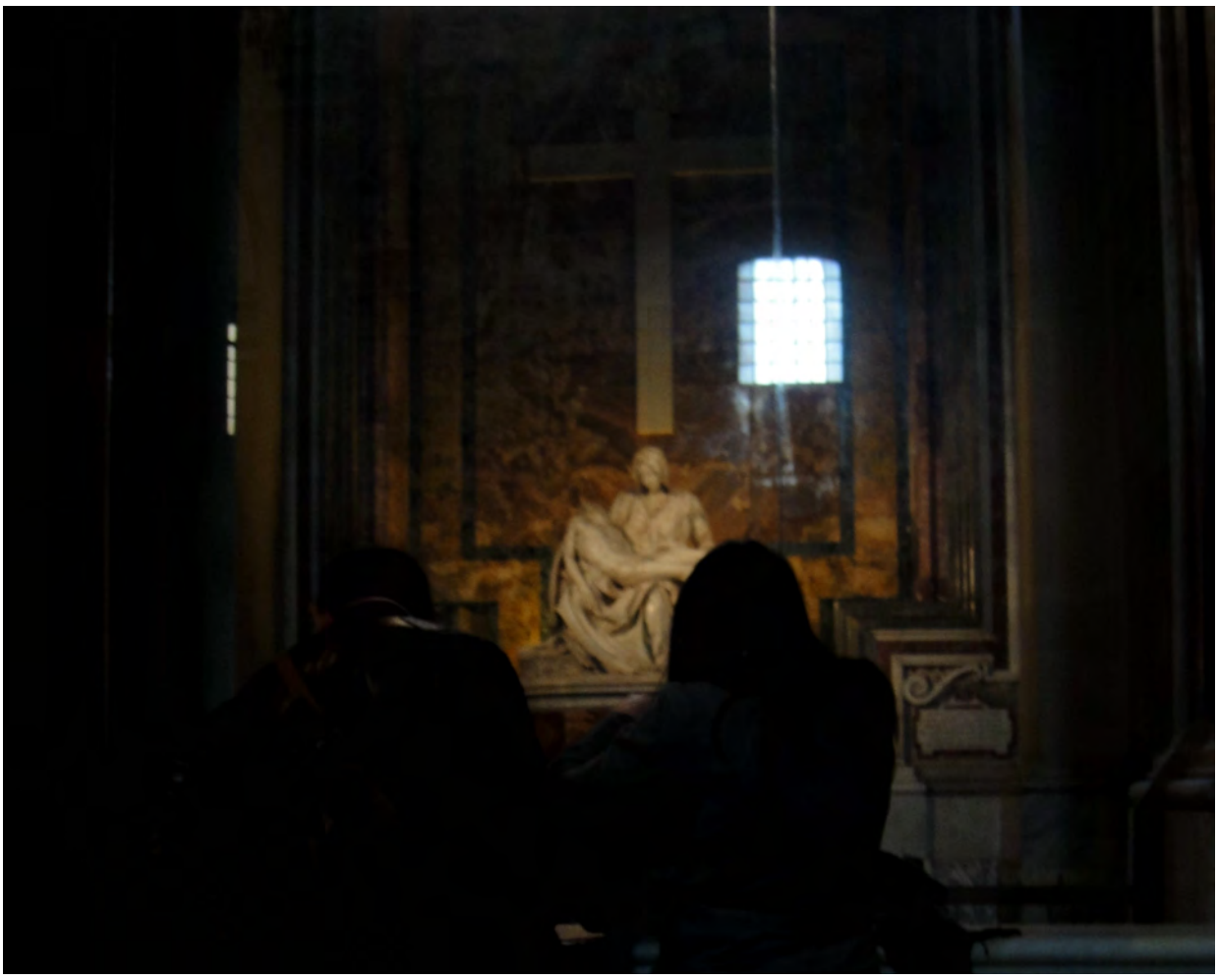

Figure 14: So Near Yet So Far. The Pietà by Michelangelo (1475-1564) Commissioned of Michelangelo by Cardinal Jean Bilhéres de Lagraulas in 1497 and completed in 1499, is displayed in the Chapel of the Pietà in the Basilica of St. Peters in the Vatican. January 2011. All the images captured by the author.

The previously found object, the one I could reach out and touch with my very own hands, validated my desire to get closer to what was identified as the original Pietà. It was in that moment that I experienced a strong desire and intense anxiety in the space that separated me from the artwork. The space between this particular object of desire and my physical body was too much, and the emptiness filled with transparent air was preventing me from fulfilling the desire that I so desperately sought after. I wanted to touch that sublime, beautiful, valued, symbolic, feared, hated copy that was, in Mitchell's (2004) words: "discovered," "revealed" "reframed" (p. 117). The presence of the copy and its accessibility became essential elements to validate my theoretical observations by opposition.

It was then and there that I understood that what validates the original was the replica, and the void between the two. The impossibility of a phenomenological experience followed by a sensorial one was a memorable fact. Although, when we talk about medium, unavoidably, we also have to talk about McLuhan (1964) and his famous aphorism "the medium is the message." His dictum became as relevant and present as blood is in water is for sharks, however it also became a "glitch" inasmuch as a non-controllable entity open to interpretation. Even McLuhan himself eventually said it was a "fallacy" adding aura to his now transcended aphorism or as I will explained later on, adding aura to his ICEVORG capable of media transgression through the strange loop approach.

With respect to McLuhan's theory, Mitchell (2005) refers to the theoretical plane from which McLuhan developed his discourse on the medium as "meta-medium" (p. 203). Mitchell names McLuhan "the great avatar of media theory" (p. 203), and describes the

role of media and the construction of identity regarding the author of the ideas as a "fallacy" or "glitch" inserted into the media stream. This insertion aims to understand the role of media in the process of semiotic/value construction, as well as the lack of complete control that our own constructions possess. In Mitchell's (2008 not in your final bibliography) words:

> If even the inventor of media studies, the great avatar of media theory who became a media star in his own right, is capable of slipping on a figurative banana peel, what lies in wait for the rest of us who think we have a right to our opinions about media? How can we hope, as McLuhan promised, to "understand media," much less become experts about them? (p. 2)

The lives and loves of images, it seems clear, cannot be assessed without some reckoning with the media in which they appear. The difference between an image and a picture, for instance, is precisely a question of medium. An image only appears in some medium or other—in paint, stone, words, or numbers. But what about media? How do they appear, make themselves manifest and understandable? It is tempting to settle on a rigorously materialist answer to this question, and to identify the medium as simply the material support in or on which an image appears. But this answer seems unsatisfactory on the face of it. A medium is more than the materials of which it is composed. It is, as Mitchell (2008) wisely insisted, a material *social practice*, a set of skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes and conventions.

Mitchell refers to the idea of avatar as a combination of media, author, context, and intention. He describes the relationship established among the elements as initially part of logical systems or structures that subsequently expand to fully developed environments

where “images live, or personas and avatars that address us and can be addressed in turn” (p. 203). For Mitchell, the lives of images cannot be assessed without considering the media in which they appear.

To further this thinking, Mitchell (2008) explains what he considers to be a key element to understand images. He indicates that the difference between a picture and an image is defined by the medium. My interpretation of Mitchell with respect to the difference between picture and image is as follows: picture is the phenomenological manifestation of stimuli presented on a medium. Image, on the other hand, refers to the theoretical construct that stands in proximity to the idea of sense data—the whole experience that combines meaning with physical stimuli and presence. From this vantage point, Mitchell contends that the difference between image and picture is a question of the medium and its relationship to the elements that it supports, as said relationship is accompanied by complex semiotic underpinnings. In his words:

> An image only appears in some medium or other in paint, stone, words, or numbers. But what about media? How do they appear, make themselves manifest and understandable? […] A medium is more than the materials of which is composed. It is a material social practice, a set of skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes, and conventions. (p. 203)

A medium in relationship to avatars is not limited to the purely operational relationships established among the parts and the whole. Quite the opposite, the medium here reaches out to incorporate the way these relationships are perceived by outside observers, observers

who arrive with a fresh mind into the discourse and the social practices involved in understanding these relationships.

More importantly, I emphasize an expanded conceptual framework for the medium since I see the medium as the fertile ground where avatars-m can exist and thrive. The ICEVORG exists as a comprehensive theoretical construct that incorporates the medium, image, and the social practices that their inter-relationships procure. Mitchell (2008) further clarifies my conception of avatar as medium in the following:

> A medium just is a "middle," an in-between or go-between, a space or pathway or messenger that connects two things-a sender to a receiver, a writer to a reader, an artist to a beholder, or (in the case of the spiritualist medium) this world to the next. The problem arises when we try to determine the boundaries of the medium. […] Defined more broadly, as a social practice, the medium of writing clearly includes the writer and the reader, the medium of painting includes the painter and beholder-and perhaps the gallery, the collector, and the museum as well. If media are middles, they are ever-elastic middles that expand to include what looks at first like their outer boundaries. The medium does not lie between sender and received; it includes and constitutes them. (p. 218)

Mitchell means that ICEVORGS are conceptual constructs that include the idea of image as representation of one's Self, but they also expand to engulf, embrace, and make part of its sense data the medium itself. For the purpose of proposing ICEVORG as the key player to access what is left of reality today, beyond Baudrillard's (1981) simulacra, it is

important to understand the role of ICEVORG as medium, message, and everything in between.

An ICEVORG, therefore, is a phenomenological experience. It is a dynamic construct that moves through texts in full orchestration with one's mind. It is a reflection of one's Self, and the medium where such reflection occurs. It is more important to bring into the discourse not the constituting elements themselves, but the interstices among them, which thrive in the medium. These interstices are originally invisible. As our consciousness becomes aware of them through phenomenological apprehension, they become sense data that inform our brains of the full meaning of the experience. It is only when those spaces become visible that we can begin to construct an idea of what lies beyond simulacra.

When I finally had a chance to experience the elements that lay between my eyes and *The Pietà* in Saint Peter's Basilica, I could see those a priori invisible elements. There is the real thing, the artwork, the sublime, and the beautiful. (see Figure 15 on next page)

Departing now from the interstices among the elements, I could observe that when I was in front of the masterpiece, I could not touch it. There I found it: a medium inside a medium that is, in turn, inside a medium and therefore must be real. Why is there an invisible medium in between reality and my phenomenological body? The answer is simple and brings Baudrillard's (1981) words full circle: I have no access to the medium. We do not have access to the medium. It is not reachable. That is what makes an experience real: the tension, and the undeniable presence of an ICEVORG.

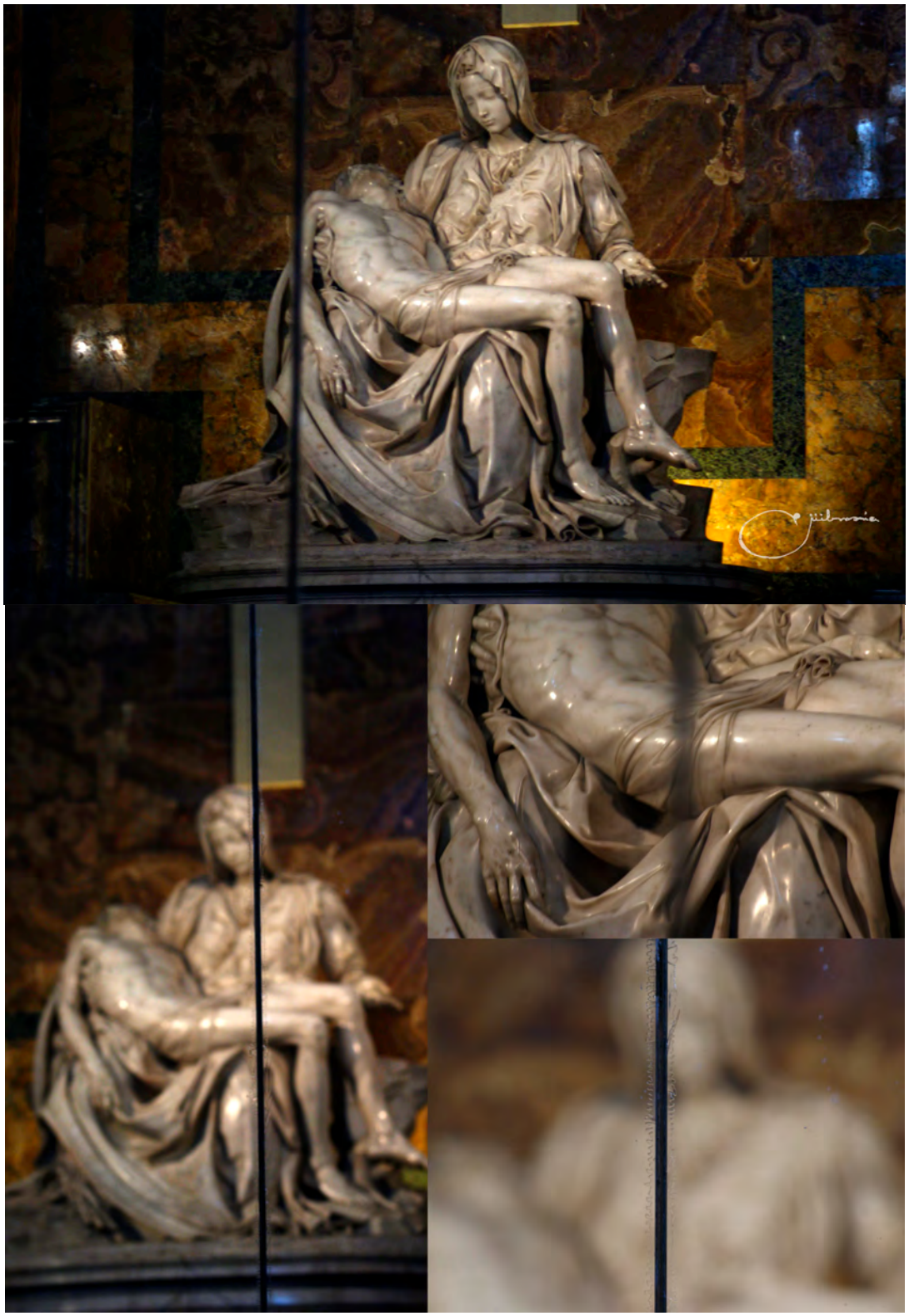

Figure 15: Visual Approach to The Pietà. Series of images meant to visualize the membrane between the real object and the observer. Artwork by Michelangelo (1475-1564) Commissioned of Michelangelo by Cardinal Jean Bilhéres de Lagraulas in 1497 and completed in 1499, is displayed in the Chapel of the Pietà in the Basilica of St. Peters in the Vatican. January 2011. All the images captured by the author.

Stated otherwise, I see the glass; the glass is the medium that validates the experience of *The Pietà*, allowing me to deem it Real. The glass represents the tension, the desire to possess; it is the urge to touch that generates the perception of the Real, thanks to the ICEVORG.

As I lift my hand and block the image, it all makes sense. Reality is what I cannot touch, what is protected by endless layers of media. Reality is protected by the void, the space, the interstices, between my consciousness and the object that I desire to touch. The interstices are invisible until I become aware of them. When I do become aware, when I choose to see them, they become visible and the ICEVORG more real; it is sense data embodied, a phenomenological experience impossible to deny. To further elaborate on the role of the invisible interstices that comprise the ICEVORG, I turn to McLuhan. In his seminal text *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, McLuhan (1964) McLuhan describes the medium by way of a metaphor of an airplane breaking the barrier of sound, and by virtue of this action, turning the invisible sound waves into visible manifestations on its wings. The temporary threshold becomes the essential tool to generate awareness. The threshold activates consciousness to reveal new and opposite forms of a medium, as both receptacle of content and as content itself. Now I can discern a parallel between the ICEVORG and McLuhan's work when he describes how the message transitions from a fragmented sequence in filmstrip to transcend its mechanical structure, thus moving into a world of "organic interrelation" (p. 154). By speeding up the sequencing, McLuhan explains, we – the audience – get carried from "the world of sequence and connections into the world of creative configuration and structure" (p. 12). We are able to see the transition

from parts to whole, which in turn reveals the presence of the medium, and therefore the illusory nature of the image. Likewise, the phenomenological experience of the ICEVORG reveals the complexity behind the construct, and, as a result, the sense of the Real beyond Baudrillard's (1981) simulacra.

In expanding upon the medium as message and the message as medium, McLuhan (1964) explains another aspect that I deem relevant to an adequate framing of what an ICEVORG intends to be. He argues that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium," and interestingly enough, he supports his argument with a reflection on how light [as in energy] is, for him, "pure information" (p. 13). McLuhan thus implies that pure information is a medium without a message. I find his reflection interesting inasmuch as an ICEVORG stands in direct opposition to pure information. An ICEVORG is a theoretical construct resulting from the relationships established among the multilayered and cross-referenced sources of information that constitute it. An ICEVORG's nature entails the multiplicity and plurality of meaning in constant transformation and interrelation. In the same way a molecule exists as a cohesive whole due to the relationship among its parts, and the maintenance of elements in constant motion, an ICEVORG is a complex theoretical construct made up similarly of parts in motion. One of those parts corresponds to the visual representation of the Self, but the remaining parts/layers/components are references to other sources of information that are in constant transformation as well.

An ICEVORG is the medium that has not one but as many messages as needed to accommodate itself to any specific context in order to provide a phenomenological experience to the subject it signifies. Being that the nature of the ICEVORG is organic and

transforming, it relates to McLuhan's observations on the speed at which a message moves: "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale of pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan, 1994, p.8)

One key component of the ICEVORG is the idea of reflection of the Self and the interstices in between medium and subject. That said, I want to take the notion of ICEVORG a step further by contrasting it with what McLuhan (1994) claims about the myth of Narcissus. McLuhan describes the myth as a human experience and reminds us that the name itself, "Narcissus," means "narcosis" or "numbness." He continues that the image became an extension of Narcissus that was deemed invisible until he became aware of it. For Narcissus, the reflection was another person, not him. That "error" in perception is what made Narcissus numb to his own presence, McLuhan suggests. We experience the polysemic nature of the ICEVORG by means of the same numbness, though identification with the construct persists, nonetheless. To express this thought in a different way, we see the ICEVORG as a container of ourselves, but as an enhanced extension, an augmentation, an improvement. As we see the ICEVORG as such, we become what McLuhan calls "closed system" (p. 42). By "closed system," McLuhan means that the medium – the mirror, the reflection, the pond, and so forth– becomes integral to its operator – the subject, the human, the Self. They fuse into a whole system that self-perpetuates as long as there is constant feedback, similar to that of a mirror, or the pond, or any other medium that makes us numb.

According to McLuhan (1964), the Narcissus myth points out "the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than

themselves" (p. 42). This inconspicuous detail in the myth becomes germane to the conceptual framework of the ICEVORG. As McLuhan suggests, we as a society have interpreted the myth of Narcissus incorrectly when we assume that he fell in love with himself. One can indeed offer a more sound interpretation. The more sound interpretation affirms that Narcissus fell in love with otherness; he never saw himself, but rather thought the image was that of somebody else. As McLuhan puts it,

> [T]he wisdom of the Narcissus myth does not convey any idea that Narcissus fell in love with anything he regarded as himself. Obviously he would have had very different feelings about the image had he known it was an extension or repetition of himself. It is perhaps, indicative of the bias of our intensely technological, and therefore, narcotic culture that we have long interpreted the Narcissus story to mean that he fell in love with himself, that he imagined the reflection to be Narcissus! (p. 43)

McLuhan's observation of the unconscious and conscious awareness of the role of the medium and the messages contained in it thus informs the theoretical framework for the ICEVORG. An ICEVORG is not only a projection of the self as a simulated physical phenomenon – as in a reflected image on a mirror – but a more comprehensive one that pretends, expects, and hopes to be more inclusive. To better illustrate, let us go back into Saint Peter's Basilica and stand in front of the Pietà one last time. Do I consider Michelangelo's masterpiece an ICEVORG? If so, why do I consider *The Pietà* an ICEVORG?

No, I don´t. Michangelo's Pietà is not an ICEVORG, and here is why:

1. The Pietà is an avatar inasmuch it is a representation of a physical reality. It simulates a real situation—in this case, human bodies in a dramatic composition with intention and agency (more on agency later).
2. The work of art is defined as a real object, one that needs to be protected behind a conceptually invisible medium that escapes our consciousness and can be brought into it by means of phenomenology—awareness.
3. As in the Narcissus myth, the work of art is a reflection of who we could be if improved, augmented, or bettered. I must add that one does not need to be an artist or a cultural producer in order to project and reflect oneself as a human into the work of art. The mere fact of sharing the same status of "human" with the author is enough to trigger the reflection. If a human can do that, I could do that, given the talent, the circumstances, and the means.
4. The cultural product/construct offers a phenomenological experience. It is sense data. What this means is that when I experience the work of art, my brain creates a specific unit of meaning, of sense data, to associate with the sensorial experience and store it as codified meaning. I can access this meaning in the form of memory, to compare and contrast with other experiences.
5. It is capable of cross-referencing multiple layers of complex meaning. These meanings range from academic analyses of the work itself to

endless transformations from medium to medium that serve as platforms for reinvention, reinterpretation, and critical analysis.

6. It exists as reproduced and reproducible image in a plethora of media, and therefore as sense data.
7. It never dies. It is immortal because it has expanded its own representation beyond the limits of its physical appearance into the realm of a digital being (Kim, 2001). As such, it is subject to a potential digital eternity as it is cross-referenced in multidimensional media.
8. It does require an inconspicuous intermediating substrate to protect it. The intermediation that I am referring to may range from operative aspects in the handling of the artwork to physical walls and specialized containers and/or spaces.

However, the most fundamental aspect of what constitutes an ICEVORG, for the purposes of my dissertation, is that it requires a cyborg to inhabit. I will explain this in a more precise way in the following chapters. An ICEVORG is, to follow and expand upon the work of McLuhan (1964), not necessarily an extension of the body but it has a body. An ICEVORG, more importantly, is an extension of the Self as perceived by the other, as well the perception of the Self as perceived by oneself from the perspective of "otherness." As an augmented version of the Self, it demands a never-ending desire to keep improving, keep getting better, to top itself. By pursuing the endless path of improvement, it maintains its relevance and transformation. An ICEVORG's nature could be explained, I argue, by McLuhan's account of "auto-amputation," which he employs to describe the act of

depending on another medium to perceive one's self as whole, and to acquire some sense of balance as a human being. McLuhan explains that we use invention and technology to extend various parts of our bodies in order to feel adequate given the speed at which society moves today. When we "amputate" our consciousness and expand it, we are creating augmented versions of our bodies that affect the way our brains work; we push our brains into a more accelerated state to adjust to the pace of the world as it is thrust forward by electronic communication (McLuhan, 1964, p. 42).

This is the crux of the Narcissus myth for McLuhan—the idea that by attempting to control the way our reflection is constructed, we create a conceptual amputation of the Self. However, as we recognize that our identity is no longer contained in our own body, we can no longer recognize ourselves. On this matter, McLuhan (1964) writes:

> This is the sense of the Narcissus myth. The young man's image is a self-amputation or extension induced by irritation pressures. As counter-irritant, the image produces a generalized numbness or shock that declines recognition. Self-amputation forbids self-recognition. (p. 43)

With McLuhan's words in mind, I argue that an ICEVORG is a form of resistance against the self-initiated amputations that occur when our identities move from medium to medium. It is the discovery of those invisible layers between objects and meanings that work as the central nervous system, the backbone, of an ICEVORG, as I will explain in chapter six, where I theorize at full speed the construct I am attempting to conjure into life. Without the invisible interstice sitting on the other side of our awareness, an ICEVORG could be defined as anything else: an icon, a symbol, an index, an image (Barthes, 1977).

In other words, without a mediating interstice, an ICEVORG cannot become the door into the observations of what is left of the order of the Real.

In order to accentuate and finalize – for the moment – the idea of what an ICEVORG is, I will go back to the moment where I became aware of what was previously invisible to me: the glass preventing my body from having a full phenomenological multi-sensory experience of the Pietà. As I raised my hand in front of the artwork, all the layers became visible.

The tempered glass forces a space in between. There is a fence in front of the glass. There are endless flashes from tourists' cameras bouncing off the glass, lights, and other elements around the work of art, and the people around it, and me.

Yet to be an ICEVORG, as explained, the work must be a container of layers of meaning expressed in different media. The sense data codenamed "Pietà" must be capable of moving from medium to medium without losing meaning. I found the solution to this scholarly riddle in my research when I discovered that the additional medium that I refer to as the "interstice," the hidden layer signifying the amputation of the object from the Real, was not there in the past. The tempered glass that "protected" the piece, and by virtue of this action, created a door to access a post-simulacra reality, was not there before. It was an addition resulting from an attack to Michelangelo's masterpiece. That was it! I found the missing link for validating the conceptual framework that defines an ICEVORG.

In the article "The Attack on the Pietà: An Archetypal Analysis," Teunissen and Hinz (1974) detail how on May 21 of 1972, the Hungarian-born émigré to Australia, Laszlo Toth, battered with a hammer "one of the greatest art treasures of the western

world, the Pietà, which depicts the Virgin Mother looking down upon the broken body of her Son lying in her lap" (p. 43). The assailant, they explain, first struck at the resigned left arm of the Madonna, then her eye, nose, and folded veil. It was a two-minute attack, followed by an eight-hour questioning session, where Toth asserted, "I am Jesus Christ." The news traveled across the globe, and raised concerns in the art world regarding the need for greater protection of artifacts of cultural heritage.

But at the same time, the attack makes room for intellectual inquiry about the value of the work of art, the originality, and above all, the relationship between what may be perceived as the "real" object to be observed, revered, and even fetishized. On May 22, 1972, a day after the incident, the *New York Times* published an article on the attack (Knight, 1972). The article features interviews with experts in the field, who confirm the possibility of a repair, but at the same time, agree on the transformation to which the masterpiece was subjected, and the impossibility of returning it to its original state. According to Knight, Sheldon Keck, a professor of art conservation at the State University College at Oneonta, New York, said that "while the pieces could be reassembled, the joints might deteriorate in time," adding that "the fingers have been repaired before, I don't know when, but the Pietà was X-rayed when it was brought here for the 1964 World's Fair, and they found metal pins holding the fingers in place" (p. 2).

Even though this detail may seem irrelevant, it relates to the conceptualization of the notion of ICEVORG in that a new invisible layer added to the representation confirms the originality of it. This added layer, I mentioned, is inconspicuous, until revealed. In this case, an x-ray machine revealed the presence of human intervention in the artwork.


Figure 16: The Attacker. The famous Pieta by Michael Angelo which was severely damaged on May 21, 1972 by Laszlo Toth a fanatic Hungarian born Australian judged insane and confined to mental hospital for 2 years. now entirely restored and back in St Peter Basilion at the Vatican, protected by glass window to prevent further damage. Pope Paul VI has come down to the Basilica to see it and pray before the Pieta.

I find this to be an important component to reinforce the idea of an ICEVORG. The metal wires used to create the illusion of being untouched indeed provide evidence of the originality of a work that once was unique, untouched, and sublime. Yet, following the philosophical discourse of Baudrillard's (1981) simulacrum, I want to argue that the original work of art has become an enhanced version of itself. It has surpassed its original state by means of destruction. It is then the act of destruction that provides an additional piece of sense data towards the recognition of this particular work of art as "Real" beyond reality. Knight (1972) concludes his article by quoting Thomas P. F. Hoving, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who indicates that "while the pieces can be reassembled, he feared that the subtleties of Michelangelo's work might be marred," and finally adds, "Something with that extraordinary tense balances between details would be rather seriously affected by any damage" (p. 2).

In an attempt to better understand this particular incident and how it affects the perception of Michelangelo's Pietà, as an ICEVORG, as phenomenological experience, I would like to add Baudrillard's (1987) perspective on art: "[a]rt is profoundly seduction, and although I have spoken enthusiastically about seduction. I do not want to fall prey to the seduction of art" (p. 98).

By referring to art as "seduction," Baudrillard (1987) is speaking in terms of simulation and simulacra, reflecting a more skeptical, critical, and paradoxical position to question the role of art in the construction and perception of Reality. In doing so, he is departing from the recognition that a work of art is a representation of reality, but instead never reality itself; it tends to disappear, given its conceptual and material temporality. For

Baudrillard "art is engaged in the process of its own disappearance" (p. 99). His words here can be interpreted both metaphorically and literally. As long as it belongs to the physical world, any work of art is (and in actuality, this observation is also applicable to the world of electronic code) subject to deterioration over time, and hence disappears. In a more metaphorical sense, the vanishing act described by Baudrillard has to do with the fact that a work of art, especially a masterpiece such as *The Pietà*, disappears inasmuch as it becomes a commodity with symbolic value. Following Baudrillard's views, by virtue of becoming a commodity, a work of art, to avoid complete alienation, turns itself into an absolute commodity. In a very classically Baudrillardian fashion, I argue that he turns the semantic structure of a term and folds it inside out to reveal its meaning, just like the reflection in the mirror once one stops seeing oneself or the mirror, but everything in between as a whole. In Baudrillard's words:

> An absolute object is one with no value and indifferent quality, avoiding objective alienation by making itself more object than the object – giving it a fatal quality… we find ourselves in a realm that has nothing to do with value, only the fantasy of absolute value, the ecstasy of value. This is not only true on the economic level, but on the aesthetic level as well. We are in the jungle of fetish-objects, and the fetish object as everyone knows, has no value in itself, or rather it has so much value that it cannot be exchanged. This is the point we have reached in art today, and this is the superior irony… a superiorly ironic commodity because it no longer meant anything. (p. 101)

When a work of art has turned into fetish, that is an object desired by all, thus suggesting its possession as the ultimate achievement of power, it has transcended its own limitations and now is capable of the transgressing boundaries defined by every medium. The object then, in this case *The Pietà*, has taken on, according to Baudrillard's (1987) perspective on art, the characteristics of shock, strangeness, surprise, and even self-destruction. The art object as a fetish "must work to deconstruct its traditional aura, its authority and its power of illusion to stand out in the pure obscenity of commodity. It must destroy itself as a familiar object and become monstrously unfamiliar" (p. 101).

In interpreting Baudrillard's (1987) words, I find myself compelled to claim that he is writing at a conceptual level. I hold that the act of destruction and disappearance he refers to describes the transformation of the art object from a representation made out of physical matter to a realm of abstract thoughts. In other words, as an art object, *The Pietà* becomes pure sense data that can be experienced in a phenomenological way, but not only in the original state of the text, so to speak, but as an idea that can take form in basically any media as long as it preserves a level of recognition. The art object then becomes a story, a narrative that can be applied with an intertextual approach. By vanishing as a physical object and assuming the conceptual framework of an ICEVORG, the art object is no longer limited by the constraints of a single narrative or imprisoned by its marble cage. *The Pietà* transcends, and now, as a story, it is capable of transgressing the boundaries between worlds, between media, between reality and hyperreality. The art object, as a story, as ICEVORG, in the same fashion as Borges's ideal map replacing the original territory, is capable of becoming more than what it originally was.

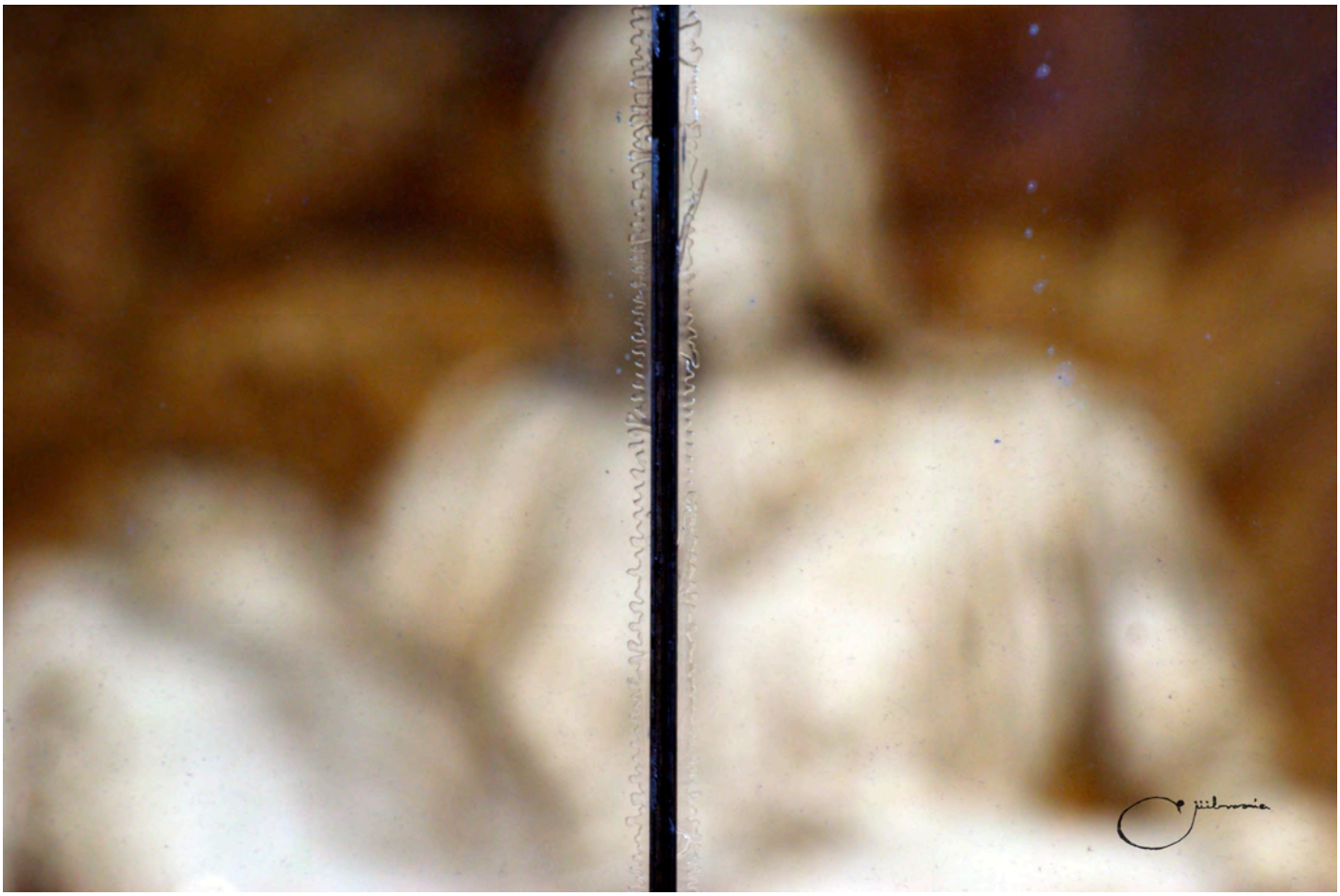

Figure 17: Close up of the transparent bullet-proof layer separating the observer from the observed. The theoretical observation that allowed the birth of the notion of ICEVORG. January 2011. Digital image captured by the author. .

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Avatars, Cyborgs, Doppelgängers, Agents, Apparitions, Fiends, Robots, Ghosts, Synthespians, Ghouls, Androids, Racists, Spirits, Werewolves, Elves, Demons, Replicants, Tricksters, Vampires, Monsters, Angels, Ogres, Zombies, Gods, Deities, Chickens, Chupacabras, Aliens, Scholars, and the Kitchen Sink.

An avatar and a cyborg walk into a bar… they are in the midst of a great scholarly discussion about the differences between humans and demons when a vampire interrupts them; he asks: Has Baudrillard returned from America with my crucifix? There is no joke, implicit or explicit. There is no punch line; we are the joke. As Baudrillard (2001) says, "in the fragment, there's the residual element – what still remains of what has been lost… …[T]he fragment is a deliberate practice, the fragmentary is a rejection of totalization" (p. 28). For Gane (2010), when Baudrillard describes these residual elements he describes a rupture into pieces that are different in nature. "Baudrillard includes the spiral of the fragment and the fractal (F). The fragment belongs to the symbolic order, but the fractal belongs to the semiotic or networked order. There is a whole range of phenomena that Baudrillard identifies as fragments – including the aphorism, the witticism, the joke, the anagram, the singularity" (Smith, 2010, p. 81).

For Baudrillard (2001), the conceptual places left within a language (or reality) assist in the construction of symbolic language. Baudrillard emphasizes this idea by claiming that "although there might be some characteristics that are shared between fragment and fractal, such as ephemerality and instantaneity, the difference is fundamental

in the sense that a fragment creates a whole symbolic space around “ (p. 28). When reality is shattered into a billion pieces, and some pieces into another billion pieces, the resulting empty space constitutes yet another piece of the never-ending puzzle of life. The sum is greater than the parts, and we are left to decide which one of them came first. In Baudrillard’s words:

> I’ve been through totalities [les ensembles] myself and, in this sense, the fragment is a product of this passage through totalities [realities]. It isn’t a formal, aesthetic option. The fragmentary is the product of a resolve to destroy a totality and the will to confront emptiness and disappearance. (p.28)

In commenting about fragmentation, a universal question comes to mind: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? McLuhan (1964) responded to this perennial universal question in a way that helped me to better understand the difference. To explain how mechanization affects the growth of the economy, McLuhan talks about the endless process of fragmentation used to increase production speed, and how speed, in return, affects society by defining its different systems of serial mechanization. He argues that by putting parts into a line of production with no causality established among them, we are removed from understanding the concept of change. He uses this argument to describe how a medium, in this case electricity, due to its high speed (beyond what our sensory apparatus can consciously perceive), precludes the possibility of understanding the sequencing of events:

> [T]here is no principle of causality in a mere sequence. That one thing follows another accounts for nothing. Nothing follows from following except change. So

> the greatest of all reversals occurred with electricity, that ended sequence by making things instant. With instant speed the causes of things began to emerge to awareness again, as they had not done with things in sequence and in concatenation accordingly. Instead of asking which came first the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg's idea for getting more eggs. (p. 12)

In my own reading of McLuhan's (1964) observation, I find the notion of avatars and other human-created monsters in direct connection to sequencing and speed without concatenation. It is the dismemberment of the parts that constitute an avatar—that allows speed to generate interstices between the media I have mentioned in my preceding arguments. When I apply McLuhan's claim that "nothing follows from following except change" (p. 12) to the emergence of avatars in cyberspace, virtual worlds, and electronic social media, it informs and nurtures my own discourse, particularly as it concerns the notion of ICEVORG.

It is the speed of light that procures the frenzy evolution. Our wholeness as individuals, based on the concept of "I," was a given before electronic communication and, more specifically, before hypertext. When the idea of "I" was deconstructed and turned into hundreds of smaller parts, each one of them kept a bit of the original recipe, but still proposed an augmented reality when combined in different contexts. To be "I" after computers were introduced into our collective consciousness was a concept that evolved from the analog individual to an augmented human construct that complied with Baudrillard's (1981) order of the Hyperreal. More than reality, the territory – the self – was covered by the exactitude of its replica, yet bettered. To be "I" now means to be the owner

of a shattered identity similar to a mirror smashed into hundreds of little parts, with each one containing a representation of the whole, but never all of it at once. To be "I" nowadays is to be an email, a Facebook® profile, a Twitter® account, an Instagram® creature, a cell phone number, an avatar, another avatar, and another, and another. "I" is represented by endless iterations constructed in sequence and concatenation to adapt and evolve in today's new media. We are neither the chicken nor the egg, but everything in between.

Every representation of our "I" that we birth to inhabit new media, and we discover in our path, is a mental creature meant to reflect upon another Narcissus pond. We then fall in love not only with the image, the avatar, we create to reflect on the surface of the medium, but with the medium itself. I want to argue that we are, after all, fooled into believing that the avatar we create is a representation of our very own selves, and as such, a valid extension of our identity. I will elaborate more on this notion when I introduce the role of postmodern art and its relationship to Baudrillard's (1981) philosophy of simulacra in the next chapter.

On the other hand, it is in the best interest of my project to make sure that the conceptual framework that I am using to construct the concept of ICEVORG is not confused with other related conceptual constructs, such as the cyborg, doppelgänger, replicant, or a normal avatar itself.

Moreover, I must clarify that, in order to conclude the previous chapter, I constructed my discourse to favor the argument that an avatar is an object of desire, a fetish, and that this object becomes disassociated with a physical body. This basically

means that an ICEVORG no longer needs a particular body to exist, but only a medium to be. That being said, I would like to focus on foundational texts that will ultimately help me synthesize the definition of ICEVORG, and to distinguish my proposed construct from other forms of identity representation that abound in scholarly discourse today.

According to one of the most respected and referenced scholars in media studies, Haraway (1991), a cyborg is a hybrid organism that combines fact and fiction. In her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Haraway elaborates upon the concept of the cyborg. She gives special emphasis to the political aspect of her theoretical construct as it relates to feminism, and the construction of identity in light of today's technological progress. In addition to a cyborg being a hybrid organism, Haraway argues that a cyborg is, more specifically, brought to life as a political object by the technological progress of society. It is a creature birthed in social relations, and constructed under oppression as an optical illusion to give structure to what Haraway argues is the experience of being a woman in modernity.

However, as Nusselder (2009) explains, the term "cyborg" was not coined by Haraway,. On the contrary, Nusselder claims that NASA scientist Manfred Clynes coined the term "cyborg" in 1960 by combining the terms "cybernetics" and "organism." The term "cyborg" was initially meant to signify an organism capable of unconscious existence as an "exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system" (Clynes, 1960, p. 27). Yet, 50 years of scholarly development on the subject has expanded the meaning of the term to refer to humans' dependence on

technology, so that we "think that all who enter cyberspace become cyborgs because they depend on machines for their online life" (Jordan, 1999, p. 4).

On the other hand, Haraway (2004) discloses to her readers that her seminal text *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* was the first paper she wrote on a computer. She claims that the paper was politically charged so as to be understood as a remaking of structures while challenging them. As Haraway says, "part of remaking ourselves as socialist-feminist human beings is remaking the sciences which construct the category of 'nature' and empower its definitions in technlogy" (p. 43). Her quest was to shake the establishment by proposing new forms for seeing old structures. In her words:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource of the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stake in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction and imagination. (p. 150)

Haraway's paper combines elements that are, in her words, "true and necessary simultaneously" (p. 3) to escape unkind origins written about how to think , critique, and remember war and its offspring. Such motivations led her to claim the cyborg as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction (Haraway, 1985, p. 65), the cyborg is an entity that contests the dualism of nature/artifice, organism/technology and self/Other" (as cited in Toffoletti, 2007, p. 21).

In interpreting Haraway (2004), Toffoletti (2007) argues that Haraway purposefully confuses the categories. She claims that nature, culture, organism, and machine intertwine to challenge the myth of original unity and "its intimate associations with the natural" (p. 21). More importantly, Toffoletti claims that, in her reading of the cyborg, she has found that it provides "new modes for conceiving both social and bodily realities and the universal notion of women's shared experience" (p. 20). Toffoletti argues that the conceptual framework that has given rise to the cyborg is of primordial importance for the construction of posthuman theory. A posthuman theoretical construct such as the cyborg, she argues, "exhibits a confusion of fact and fiction, science and technology, the virtual and the actual" (p. 21). The confusion Toffoletti describes is directly related to the interstices that assisted me in the construction of the idea of ICEVORG, which will, in turn, help me construct the notion of experiencing the Real through postmodern art. Haraway's cyborg, Toffoletti continues in her analysis, "disavows identity" (p. 21), and by virtue of this action, women are able to refigure bodies and identities outside of Self/Other relations. I will revisit the notion of cyborg when I later reference the work of French

postmodern/posthuman artist Orlan, who is meant to serve as one of the two case studies to better illustrate the function and mechanics of the ICEVORG.

For the time being, the most important aspect to note in Haraway's (1991) cyborg is that it is a key player in the construction of a contemporary philosophy known as "posthumanism" (sometimes called "transhumanism"), which represents a field of inquiry and set of practices that, in light of the critique of humanism, does not ask what a person is but rather, "*How* is a person?" Such a question redirects focus from the intentionality of the function of a person in society to the abstract idea of what an individual could be once the embodiment where the self is constrained and contained transforms into an entity based on processes, performances, and decentralized agents. This transformation, according to Haraway, moves towards ontological and epistemological transcendence, preventing violence by undermining notions of superiority by virtue of physical gender, class, and race (Weinstone, 2004).

Therefore, what is important to note is that the cyborg is conceived of as a hybrid entity, existing as a body, yet "body and identity are redefined so that the sanctity of human essence and identity are replaced by the multiple configurations, interconnections and embodiments between organic and technological systems that define the posthuman" (Toffoleti, 2007, p. 148). Cyborgs are hybrid creature consisting in the combination of machine/technology and body (Haraway, 1985). The relevance of the cyborg to postmodern philosophy is based on precisely this principle of hybridity among realities that converge into a single conception of Self, but still exist in different media that may be sharing space (as found in the case of augmented reality). When we talk about Haraway's

cyborg, Weinstone (2004) explains in her text *Avatar Bodies*, we are talking about "networked" selves, about virtual surgery, about reproductive technologies, life preservation, cyborg anthropology, virtual gaming, even ATM banking, inasmuch as these represent shared space in different media.

In other words, a cyborg must be embodied; there cannot be a cyborg without a body. A cyborg is dependent on the embodiment of technology to coexist as two entities sharing a single space. They cannot be separated without dismemberment, without disruption of the established relationship. The superiority of technology is intertwined with the inferiority of our decaying bodies. However, at the same time, the boundaries between the realities that once separated body and object are still present. The key to full comprehension of the cyborg is to interiorize the simple fact that, in today's society, we are already cyborgs. No longer considered optional, cyborgs in society are reaching the level of naturalization. We are born cyborgs and die cyborgs, as the concept is not limited by the physical world. We are cyborgs when we drive, watch a movie, wear glasses, insert breast implants, or become dependent on any social network by means of a cell phone.

After I was reconstructed from the accident on highway 95, and my skull was repaired with what the doctor called "cement bone," I came to realize that I was indeed a cyborg. I am a hybrid creature created by the high-tech components integrated into my body. Interestingly enough, the definition of a cyborg as a constant separation of two realities integrated in one cohesive construct was made evident a few years ago when "something happened" inside my skull. According to my family doctor, an internal stitch holding together the edges of the surgical incision made to repair my fractured skull

decided to give up. My eye was badly swollen. I looked awful, but felt fine. After x-rays and CAT scans, I was called back to the operating table for a tune up to restore my current state to its previous "natural" state of being. I am therefore, by definition, a cyborg. I am a hybrid of man/machine, nature/technology, and reality/fiction. To make matters more interesting, my cyborg status does not end at the mechanical level, but extends to the neurochemical. Every time I need to write, focus, or attempt some level of concentration, I have to take a little chemical widely known under the commercial brand name of "Ritalin."[19] In theory, once inside, this high-tech chemical becomes one with my mental functions, thus procuring a better version of my Self. In addition, I take a daily low dose of aspirin to balance my inherited high cholesterol, Fluoxetine[20] to alter my clinically diagnosed depression, and my daily pill of statin[21]. I wish I was a cyclops, but I am not; I am a cyborg.

When Haraway (2004) touches upon the subject of the relationship between technology and the body, she talks about it in terms of what she describes as "technological determinism," arguing that it is "one ideological space opened up by the reconceptions of machine and organism as coded texts through which we engage in the play or writing and reading the world" (p.11). She refers to a concept, the "textualization of

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[19] **methylphenidate** |ˌmeTHəlˈfenəˌdāt| noun. A synthetic drug that stimulates the sympathetic and central nervous systems and is used to improve mental activity in attention deficit disorder and other conditions.

[20] **fluoxetine** |flo͞oˈäksəˌtīn| noun. A synthetic compound that inhibits the uptake of serotonin in the brain and is taken to treat depression. Also called Prozac.

[21] **statin** |ˈstatnˈstætɪn| noun. Any of a group of drugs that act to reduce levels of fats, including triglycerides and cholesterol, in the blood.

everything," a concept that will acquire more importance as my discourse evolves and walks into the case studies of the next chapter. The textualization of everything is an effect proper to poststructuralist and postmodernist theory, where the construction of meaning is subject to constant revision and the search for validation. It is within the purview of postmodernism that Haraway's cyborg comes into being to "subvert myriad organic wholes" by means of "destroying 'man' by the 'machine' or 'meaningful political action' by the 'text'" (p. 11). Put otherwise, the politics of self are disrupted by the appearance of the cyborg in the fabric of daily life. It is, to make things clearer, what I just described as my daily routine of ingesting chemical microprocessors to adjust the nature of my consciousness to turn me into what a given society determines a "normal" human being. From Haraway's perspective, her cyborg is not only possible, but relevant to society and its future, as it goes hand in hand with the development of technology, and more specifically, with the development of nanotechnology:

> Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible. Modern machinery is an irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality. The silicon chip is a surface for writing; it is etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise, the ultimate interference for nuclear scores. Writing, power, and technology are old partners in Western stories of the origin of civilization, but miniaturization has changed our experience of mechanism. (Haraway, 2004, p. 153)

While Haraway's work dates back to the 90s, the industry and size reduction of technology have evolved in such a dramatic way that her words remain integral to the development of

theories and cultural criticism in technology, and in literary, media, art, and design studies as well. Along the lines of the evolution of technology, Milburn (2008) quotes K. Eric Drexler (1991), a key figure in the emerging field of nanotechnology, as summarizing the goal of the field as "thorough and inexpensive control of the structure of matter" (p. 10). Drexler is essentially stating, in less complex terms, that nanotechnology is the practical manipulation of atoms; it is engineering conducted on the molecular scale. In addition, what I find to be the most interesting is Milburn's account of how nanoscopic machines, often called "assemblers" or "nanobots," will soon be used to construct objects on an atom-by-atom basis. He writes:

> Modeled after biological "machines" like enzymes, ribosomes, and mitochondria – even the cell – these nanomachines will have specific purposes such as binding two chemical elements together or taking certain compounds apart, and will also be designed to replicate themselves so that the speed and scale of molecular manufacturing may be increased. (p. 261)

In reflecting on Haraway's (1985) work, Milburn (2002) focuses on how her discourse positions the boundary between science fiction and social reality as an optical illusion. That illusion, the undefined space between worlds, between texts, is what "gives rise to a 'cyborg' epistemology threatening humanistic borders" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). Milburn asserts that Haraway's discourse suggests that cyborg fusions and science technologies transfigure embodied experience, therefore "enabling the appearance of a posthuman subject" (p. 270).

More importantly, Milburn (2002) argues that nanotechnology is a conceptual territory where the ontological transgression of boundaries takes place and spreads, resulting in the "posthuman condition"—a concept that is integral to the development of ICEVORG as a port of entry to the Real. On the posthuman condition, Milburn (2002) writes:

> Nanotechnology is an active site of such cyborg boundary confusions and posthuman productivity, for within the technoscapes and dreamscapes of nanotechnology the biological and the technological interpenetrate, science, and science fiction merge, and our lives are rewritten by the imaginative gaze—the new "nanological" way of seeing—resulting from the splice. The possible parameters of human subjectivities and human bodies, the limits of somatic existence, are transformed by the invisible machinations of nanotechnology—both the nanowriting of today and the nanoengineering of the future—facilitating the eclipse of man and the dawning of the posthuman condition. (p. 270)

Haraway's (1991) thoughts reinforce the notion of the posthuman condition in a more lyrical way, as she writes that our best machines –and I argue that nanobots are indeed the best machines we, humanity, currently have as even a concept—are "made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum" (p. 153).

Haraway (1991) then ventures deeper into the world of political discourse and challenges us—her readers—to see cyborgs as political entities capable of social

resistance. She does this by referencing, to my surprise, none other than Baudrillard (1984) himself. She writes:

> Cyborgs are ether, quintessence. The ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshine-belt machines are so deadly. They are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness or its simulation [Baurdillard, 1984]. Ultimately the "hardest" science is about the realm of greatest boundary confusion, the realm of pure number, pure spirit, C31, cryptography, and the preservation of potent secrets. The new machines are so clean and light. Their engineers are sun-worshipers mediating a new scientific revolution associated with the night dream of post-industrial society. There might be a cyborg Alice taking account of these new dimensions. (p. 154)

Haraway (1991) makes reference to Baudrillard (1984) in her work to argue the concept of consciousness as being simulated, and that by virtue of the transgression of boundaries offered by yet another simulation (that of the medium), we are—as humans—capable of moving beyond the limitations of our bodies. As we engage in said conceptual movements, we become inhabitants of the Hyperreal. This is an imaginary, yet very real, place, where boundaries are limited to the capabilities offered by technology to replicate, improve, and erase realities through subtle and gradual replacement. To enhance my argument, I return to the words of Milburn (2002) in his article on nanotechnology:

> The birth of nanotechnology as a scientific discipline provokes the hyperreal collapse of humanistic discourse, puncturing the fragile membrane between real

> and simulation, science and science fiction, organism and machine, and heralding metamorphic futures and cyborganic discontinuities. (p. 285)

The point that Milburn (2002) arrives at is precisely the point that I am trying to make: that it is there, in that "fragile membrane between real and simulation" (p. 285), where ICEVORG is born, and where it is nurtured by technology and fed by a never-ending flow of hypertext. As I will now suggest and elaborate upon later, the parallels between the notion of cyborg and the conceptual framework I have been constructing to support my own proposed creature, secularly baptized as "ICEVORG," are only the beginning, though their differences are clear and will be evident as I continue to construct my discourse.

To finalize this rather succinct description of what a cyborg is from the perspective of its main scholar and creator, I must bring Haraway (1985) to the surface of the page once again, so that she may provide an appropriate sense of closure. The most relevant aspect to be adopted from Haraway's cyborg to feed and nurture my concept of ICEVORG is found in one of her more elaborated descriptions, where she says: "my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (p. 154). However, from my perspective, Haraway foretells of a future that is already part of our present, and the role that cyborgs play in the development of society has been ratified by the fact that once a person becomes a cyborg, he or she is subject to surveillance and control by the political powers in various ways. She expressed these same concerns by identifying a duality in the nature of her cyborg. Haraway argues that by embracing that potential new form of hybrid existence, we may be able to not only search, but construct our new

meanings, enjoy joint experiences with other animals and machines that claim multiple identities. But, at the same time, as cyborgs, we are subject to what Haraway describes as "the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet," which leads her to issue a final call for the search of new "more potent myths for resistance and recoupling" (p. 154).

I find it quite important to understand Haraway's (1985) idea of the cyborg as a medium as well as an agent. Once the cyborg is inside us, especially in the form of awareness, we coexist with a theoretical creature that is committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity, as Haraway suggests. Cyborgs are no longer bound by the limitations of the public-private duality; they are both public and private to the extent that they establish a new form of public privacy that is not visible to the naked eye, but is to the awareness of the construct. Cyborgs are mingled with daily life. Once created, the cyborg is a self-sustaining conceptual entity capable of reformulating the structures of culture and nature. The rules of the game, so to speak, transform the combination of machine and human in a complex unity of meaning that does not necessarily have a specific category where it can be inserted. In Haraway's words:

> The cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the Oikos[22], the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. Unlike the hopes of

[22] An oikos was the basic unit of society in most Greek city-states. It included the head of the oikos (usually the oldest male), his extended family (wife and children), and slaves, all living together in one domestic setting. Large oikoi also had farms that were usually tended by the slaves, which were also the basic agricultural unit of the ancient economy ("Oikos," 2015).

> Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; i.e., through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the Oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust… Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos. (p. 10)

I find this last quote ideal to describe the power inherent in the cyborg today, and how it relates to our new human condition, as procured by the rampant progress of electronic technology—a transformation that helps form and sculpt the notion of posthumanism.

According to Weinstone (2004), the cyborg "is perhaps the exemplary figure of posthumanism," a figure that disrupts the notion of a stable, autonomous, uniquely human self. However, a cyborg is "never a hybrid of two or more people" (p. 175). Relatedly, Hayles (1993) conceives of a cyborg as a virtual puppet, comparable to the notion of avatar in cyberspace, which has the potential to become more than a puppet representing a conceptual zone of interaction open to the subject of realization of the Otherness. Posthumanism asks "How is a person?" rather than "Who is the person?" since we are no longer subject to the constraints of the physical world in becoming and constructing a sense of identity.

Weinstone (2004) describes a very important moment in contemporary history when cultural theorist Ihab Hassan delivered the keynote address at the International

Symposium on Postmodern Performance[23] in 1976, the same year that Derrida's *Of Grammatology*[24] was made available in English. Hassan opened by announcing the "eclipse of the postmodern by the posthuman" (Weinstone, 2004, p. 8). It was Hassan who first explicitly identified the cyborg with the posthuman. Hassan described the posthuman as a Promethean construct, split by language and brought to life by technology; it "obeys only the law of change, and [is] charged with the Nietzchean task of evolving humankind beyond humanism" (p. 8). Hassan argued that times have evolved in such a way that we need to understand that the human form, including human desire and all its external representations, may have changed radically, and thus must be re-visioned. He notes, *"*We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism"(Weinstone, 2004, p.843).

In his book *The Idea of the Post Modern: A History*, Bertens (1995) explains that even though Hassan no longer plays a significant role in the debate on postmodernism, his contributions were vital to keeping the debate alive in the early 1970s. He was, Bertens argues, the scholar who promoted the terms "postmodern" and "postmodernism." "There is virtually no article or book on literary postmodernism published between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s that does not refer to Hassan's work," Bertens writes (p. 36). Moreover,

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[23] Organized by the Center for Twentieth-Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee

[24] (French: De la grammatologie) is a 1967 book by French philosopher Jacques Derrida that has been called a foundational text for deconstructive criticism. It is one of three books, the others being *Speech and Phenomena* (French: La voix et le phénomène) and *Writing and Difference* (French: L'écriture et la différence), which Derrida published in 1967 and which established his reputation. *Of Grammatology* discusses writers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Étienne Condillac, Louis Hjelmslev, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Roman Jakobson, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, André Leroi-Gourhan, and William Warburton. The English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was first published in 1976.

according to Bertens, Hassan added another important element to his idea of postmodernity by incorporating the claim that postmodernity was not simply a cultural shift but "it also involves a new relationship between human kind and their environment" (Bertens, 1995, p. 41). Hassan (1971) argues "that we are witnessing a transformation of man more radical than anything Copernicus, Darwin, Marx, or Freud ever envisaged" (p. 567). In his article, Hassan challenges us to have a response of our own –a very postmodern attitude, indeed— as readers and writers of literature. "How shall we respond to these new realities? Should we sever ourselves from the sources of imagination and change in our time?" Hassan asks (p. 568). Bertens explains that what Hassan (1983) refers to in his philosophical pondering is the notion that consciousness has absorbed the deconstruction of the world due to technology, marking an imminent and unavoidable shift of paradigms towards the "emergence of human beings as language animals, homo pictor, or homo significans, gnostic creatures constituting themselves, and increasingly their universe, by symbols of their own making" (p. 10).

Hassan's (1983) words are prescient. They foretell the future of society in that media shapes the languages of self and society in advanced capitalist states to engender the posthuman condition. Given the historical circumstances in which Hassan (1983) was writing and the technology of his time, he describes encyclopedias as data banks, which could become "nature itself" for the postmodern human. In describing the role of media, Hassan says:

> Media of course, may derealize history even as they disseminate it around the world, often as kitsch or entertainment. But media also project mind to the edge of

> the universe or into the ghostly interstices of matter, and so favor another type of immanence, which scientists since Heisenberg[25] have recognized as human participation or intervention in nature. Daniel Bell[26] perceives this as the emergent stage of cultural development, implicating human beings in the recreation of reality and confronting post-Kantian epistemologies with the enigma of artificial intelligence. (p. 10)

By "post-Kantian epistemologies," Hassan (1983) is referring to Kantian ethics, which essentially argues that people are ultimately rational beings, and rationality is the ultimate goal. That said, Hassan implies that artificial intelligence is a contradiction, due to its lack of rationality. In other words, why would we –as human beings—feel the desire to create a machine capable of destroying its creator? On the other hand, and from a more abstract point of view, I can observe Hassan's theories implemented in electronic encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia. Wikipedia's existence is founded upon the destruction of a single author, either as a person or as an institution, an effect that has led the posthuman creature, meaning each and every one of us, to perceive and accept Wikipedia as a natural occurrence. Accepting Wikipedia as natural, in turn, makes the concepts of revision and history disappear from our collective consciousness, thus pushing the electronic construct into the Real of Baudrillard's (1981) simulacra. In other words, Wikipedia is a cultural

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[25] Author's note: Werner Karl *Heisenberg* (5 December 1901 – 1 February 1976) was a German theoretical physicist and one of the key creators of quantum mechanics.

[26] Daniel Bell (May 10, 1919 – January 25, 2011) was an American sociologist, writer, editor, and professor emeritus at Harvard University, best known for his seminal contributions to the study of post-industrialism. He has been described as "one of the leading American intellectuals of the postwar era." His three best known works are *The End of Ideology, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.

phenomenon that is constantly erased by a new territory that replaces what it was a moment ago. Good analysis. As Baudrillard (1981) would argue, it is a reality that replaces itself with another reality every second. Hassan (1983) would identify it as an element in perpetual change that has "led to the 'disappearance of a sense of history' in the culture, to a pervasive depthlessness, to a 'perpetual present' from which all memory of tradition has disappeared" (p. 155).

To explain this phenomenon of erasure, Bertens (1995) presents Frederick Jameson's[27] (1991) two features that provide a conceptual framework for postmodernism—both of which are constructive for the current discussion on cyborgs. The first of Jameson's concepts is "pastiche," and the second is "discontinuity." The principle of pastiche is, according to Jameson, radical fragmentation that renders nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity. Pastiche is parody without laughter, without the satirical impulse, without reference to what once was perceived as normal. Pastiche in the age of total eclecticism is "all that remains of a parody that has lost its former function" (Bertens, 1995, p. 114). Jameson is describing a work of art, and the exhaustion to which art has been subject in the postmodern era. The artist, he argues, "is condemned to lifeless imitations and permutations, that is, to produce art that is essentially about art itself, and more specifically about its own failure" (Bertens, 1995, p. 116). There is a reason why I am introducing the term "art" into my discourse here; it is because from this moment on, I

[27] (born 14 April 1934) is an American literary critic and Marxist political theorist. He is best known for his analysis of contemporary cultural trends—he once described postmodernism as the spatialization of culture under the pressure of organized capitalism. Jameson's best-known books include Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, The Political Unconscious, and Marxism and Form. Source: Wikipedia.

am going to shift my focus from the discourse on cyborgs as physical hybrid entities back to avatars, which are artistic representations of the person, and ultimately, of the Self. I will then shift again to the ICEVORG, making it the main character of my discourse. That being said, I must complete Jameson's (1983) thoughts on pastiche as a fundamental manifestation of postmodern, and therefore, posthuman thinking. Pastiche can be observed, Jameson contends, in what he describes as "nostalgia films" (Jameson, 1998, p. 130), historical films that are, paradoxically, utterly ahistorical. For Jameson, these types of films are "invading and colonizing even those movies today which have contemporary settings: as though, for some reason, we were unable to focus on our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience"(Jameson, 1998, p. 117).

This observation then leads Jameson (1998) to present the second feature of postmodernism, as he sees it, discontinuity. He describes the second feature in terms of "its peculiar way with time," or as a language of disorder, resulting from the subject's failure "to accede fully into the realm of speech and language" (Jameson, 1998, p. 118). With respect to Jameson's second feature, Bertens (1995) explains that language gives us our experience of temporality, human time, past and present, memory, and the persistence of personal identity. Such deconstruction of the perception of time leads to an absence of the experience of temporal continuity. This side effect of postmodernity condemns us to live in a perpetual, always discontinuous, present. We can no longer live a life where temporal sequencing is taken for granted, and, I want to argue, we find ourselves in need of breaking free from our bodies. We do it by means of art, of visual representation of our bodily

presence. By breaking free from the constraints of a uni-corporeal existence, we can adjust to feel adequate and exist as a coherent whole in the postmodern era. In other words, we must be posthuman to exist in posthuman times. My argument may be validated by Jameson's description of postmodernism. He explains postmodernism in the following terms: "the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents" (Jameson, 1998, p. 125). Here is where I conclude the subject of the cyborg, for the simple reason that it requires a body to be. No body equals no cyborg. But, postmodernism does not end in the limits of the body; rather it begins where it ends.

However, in order to understand cyborgs and how they influence my dissertation work, another related concept must be put on the scholarly table. That is the concept of avatar in relation to cyborgs, and how it leads to the construction of ICEVORG. I have described the avatar as a concept that negates the cyborg by absorbing its theoretical elements and dismissing the body itself. Our need to go beyond the hybridity offered by a cyborg has moved us into the Real of the avatar. I have introduced the basic idea of what an avatar is in previous pages, and to add to what I have already said on this concept fundamental to the construction of ICEVORG, I must state that an avatar is not a cyborg. There is a concise and precise distinction between the two: A cyborg has a physical body, whereas an avatar does not need one to exist, nor does it need a fixed medium to support it, rather just a collection of media. Additionally, avatars, as I will explain in the following pages, have already become integral components in the fabric of the postmodern and posthuman culture.

**"Avatars are Not Vampires," Said Little Red Riding Hood to the Imaginary Wolf**

Avatars, as argued before, are visual representations of humans; they are forms of expression that break free from the constraints of time and space. The avatar is a being that participates in human life, yet remains distinct in both an evolutionary and an ontological sense. I have previously asserted that avatars may serve the role of conduits of consciousness among realities (Gregory, 2013; Villaverde & Roymieco, 2013). My intention in the following pages is to contrast the conceptual framework supporting what a cyborg is with what avatars promise to be, and the features they deliver to us, their operators. It is important to understand that both concepts, cyborgs and avatars (which evolves into ICEVORG), thrive in the deconstructed atmosphere of postmodernity and posthuman theory. It is the endless fragmentation, and the possibility of disrupting the linearity of time and space as proposed by postmodern philosophy, that provides fertile ground for bringing avatars into the discourse of contemporary society (Nusselder, 2009).

To get a good grasp of the avatar today, from both the scholarly and popular culture perspective, we must begin in the darkness of a movie theater, where the relatively fresh idea of the avatar was introduced into the stream of collective consciousness. I am talking about the film that bears the name avatar itself. *Avatar* was written, directed, and produced by James Cameron, and distributed by 20th Century Fox. With a massive budget of 300 million dollars, a production time of 15 years, and generating nearly 3 billion dollars in profits, *Avatar* continues to be the record-holder in terms of sales around the world (Box Office Mojo, 2012). Cameron's *Avatar* continues to hold the world box office record with $2,783,918,982 dollars in sales. Taking into consideration that the average price of a ticket

in 2012 was $7.96 (Tuttle, 2013), one can "guesstimate" that at least 400 million people became aware of what the term "avatar" refers to in a matter of just a few years. The figure I am introducing is a very poor calculation from a scientific standpoint, and it does not account for the fact that *Avatar* was reported by *TIME* magazine as "the most pirated movie of that year"; "It's been revealed that Avatar was illegally downloaded from BitTorrent[28] websites a whopping 16,500,000 times in 2010"(Levy, 2010, para. 3).

In other words, *Avatar* was not just a movie, but also a major medium to deliver an idea, a conceptual word, that was once limited to a higher order of intellectual comprehension. The term "avatar" became part of the world's cultural consciousness, thanks to *Avatar*'s worldwide screening to multicultural audiences; such pervasiveness of the term demonstrates the relevance of my discussion on avatars and cyborgs. What I find the most interesting about Cameron's film is that it serves as a theoretical bridge between a cyborg and an avatar.

According to Hillis's (2009) article "From Capital to Karma: James Cameron's *Avatar*," the movie story makes a direct reference to Plato's *Timaeus* (c. 360 BCE), where Plato introduces the concept of the demiurge[29]: *"*Therefore, we may consequently state that: this world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence…a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related" (pp. 29-30). Hillis reads the content of the movie's intertext as describing issues in

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[28] BitTorrent is a protocol supporting the practice of peer-to-peer file sharing that is used to distribute large amounts of data over the Internet ("BitTorrent," n.d.).

[29] demiurge |ˈdemēˌərj| noun: a being responsible for the creation of the universe, in particular:
• (in Platonic philosophy) the Maker or Creator of the world.
• (in Gnosticism and other theological systems) a heavenly being, subordinate to the Supreme Being, that is considered to be the controller of the material world and antagonistic to all that is purely spiritual.

connections between networks and the spirit world. He references science fiction author Samuel Delany who suggests that viewers are incapable of connecting to the experience of the movie due its complex and incoherent aesthetic, delivered through CGI[30] and 3D effects. Yet the story before the audience presents somewhat more advanced creatures that live in unison with the whole world. In his analysis of the movie, Hillis suggests that according to Delany:

> Spectators experience fluttering on the edges of a collective post-Hive Mind[31] fantasy: an inverted prelapsarian vision of the individual as a networked empath who is also already part of the tree of knowledge. Experientially, then, the film's outstanding special effects work synergistically with its depiction of the Na'vi as a pre-Cartesian society, a 3D global village literally in touch and connected with the wider sentient world they inhabit. (p. 2)

Hillis then points out how the Na'vi, the indigenous people featured in the film, interconnect with other creatures by means of a form of physical interlinking that allows the neurological systems to become one. This system is decoded by scientist Grace Augustine, a supporting character played by actress Signourney Weaver. Grace is responsible for not only developing avatar bodies, but also for understanding their language, culture, and traditions from the inside (think cultural anthropology) in order to accomplish a peaceful colonization—hence, the complex and intense cross-referencing with human history and culture.

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[30] Computer-generated Imagery

[31] Collective consciousness, the apparent consciousness of colonies of social insects such as ants, bees and termites

In Cameron's 2007 screenplay, we can find a key moment that I think will help me in describing the notion of avatar that was delivered to millions of moviegoers worldwide. It is the moment when Jake Sully, the protagonist of the fictional story, hops into the machine that will allow him to transgress the boundaries between realties and become the operator of the synthetic Na'vi avatar. As an aside, I must add that Jake is yet another great example of Baudrillard's (1981) simulacra, but with a twist that becomes central to the development of my notion of ICEVORG. Jake Sully example is a great application of Baudrillard's simulacra inasmuch as he is, according to Cameron's narrative, the identical twin of the original avatar's operator. The avatar's original operator was a military-trained human, who passed away, leaving the spot open to his brother, who is characterized in the movie as a paralyzed man bound to a wheel chair. To be precise, according to Jake Sully's very own wiki page, he was born in August 24$^{th}$ 2126, and is a paralyzed renegade Marine veteran who replaces Tom, his twin brother, who was killed on Earth ("Jake Sully," n.d.). As the movie explains, having the exact same DNA, brain, and neurological system, Jake is capable of entering his late brother's Na'vi avatar, which is basically a custom-made organic machine developed by the Avatar Program on Pandora, the alien planet where the narrative unfolds.

The relationship between Jake, his brother, and the avatar is a great example of Baudrillard's (1981) simulacra because, from a theoretical perspective, Jake replaces his better self, his brother, who was much better equipped, both physically and mentally, for the mission, yet is dead. In addition, the lack of a cyborg replicant jeopardizes the whole avatar program, as we are told in the movie's narrative. However, by means of a high-tech

electronic machine that acts as a conduit of consciousness, Jake is capable of regaining a full phenomenological experience (Heidegger, 1962) with nature. As he regains full bodily features in a body that provides much better features than those obtained with a normal body, let alone his paralyzed one, it does not end there. He discovers later in the movie the capacity to enter the wholeness of the Pandora planet, making his experience, through the use of an avatar, extend beyond Baudrillard's simulacra.

Let me then take you through Cameron's script, to the very moment when Jake Sully hops into his "link" unit, making use of what narratology theorist Ryan (2005) defines as a "metaleptic machine," to enter into his avatar for the first time:

**INT. LINK ROOM – DAY NEXT MORNING**

GRACE, NORM and JAKE approach their link units.
Jake glances through a PRESSURE WINDOW. In an adjoining chamber (the AMBIENT ROOM) JAKE'S AVATAR lies on a gurney, breathing slowly in PANDORAN AIR. NORM'S AVATAR is on a second gurney. Both are attended by med techs in exo-masks.

Norm slips into his LINK CHAIR, expertly donning biometric sensors.

**GRACE:** How much link time have you logged?
**NORM:** Five hundred and twenty hours.

Grace looks pointedly at Jake.

**JAKE:** Like -- an hour.
**GRACE:** Tell me you're joking.

Grace opens the hood of Jake's link unit. Jake starts hauling himself across from his wheelchair. She reaches to help him but --

**JAKE:** Don't! I got this.

Grace steps back, hands raised. He drags himself into the unit.

Figure 18: Several screen shots from James Cameron's movie "Avatar" from the scene where the protagonist wakes up with his consciousness inside the artificial body of an avatar. .

**GRACE:** So you just figured you'd come out here to the most hostile environment known to man, with no training of any kind, and see how it went? What was going through your head?

He meets her eyes with a defiant glare.

**JAKE:** Maybe I was just tired of doctors telling me what I couldn't do.

Grace watches him laboriously pull his inert legs into the link chair by hand.

Jake settles into the warm fluid gel packs lining the unit. It seems to enfold him. Grace adjusts his biometric sensors, then lowers the UPPER CLAMSHELL --

**GRACE:** Relax and let your mind go blank. That shouldn't be hard for you.

**JAKE:** Kiss the darkest part of my lily white -- But the SLAMMING HOOD muffles the rest.

**MAX:** Initiate link.

The LINK TECH touches some controls. ON A LARGE MONITOR a 3D SCAN of Jake's brain appears. Regions of activity flow with complex shifting colors.

**MAX:** That's a gorgeous brain. Nice activity.
**GRACE:** Go figure. (walking away) Alright, I'm going in.
**TECH:** Phase-lock at forty percent. He's in transition.

Max watches a display showing the avatar's nervous system aligning with Jake's -- two ghostly networks of light merging.

**MAX:** That's it. Find your way home. ECU JAKE, inside the link unit. His eyes move under the lids, like a dreamer in REM sleep as -- INSIDE JAKE'S MIND -- radiant streamers coalesce into a pulsing TUNNEL OF LIGHT and --THE SCREEN FLARES WHITE -- ZZZWHAP! -- resolving into an overexposed, out-of-focus image – two BLURRY FACES wearing masks, looking down.

ECU JAKE'S AVATAR -- two very intense eyes FILL FRAME, the pupils contracting. Golden irises pulse with life.

**MAX:** He's in.
**TECH:** Phase-lock ninety nine percent. The link is stable.

Blinking, Jake slowly sits up on the gurney. He looks down at his AVATAR BODY, touching his chest with one hand.

**MAX:** Take it slow, Jake. We need to check your motor control. Try touching your fingertips together - But Jake isn't listening. He's staring at his legs. He eases them off the gurney and -- HIS BLUE FEET touch the concrete floor, taking his weight. JAKE STANDS, feeling the strength in his legs. His expression is child-like with wonder.

HIS POV -- looking down at the med techs, who seem the size of children next to his 9' tall frame. He sees something like a blue tentacle curl across his arm and he JERKS AROUND in alarm. HIS TAIL. As he turns to see it, the tail sweeps instruments off a table with a crash. Jake laughs and grins at Max.

**MED TECH:** Easy, Jake, I need you to sit down -- But Jake takes a step, then another. The wires to the biomonitors pull taut, and he yanks them off his chest.

**MAX:** Jake! Wait, we have to run some tests -- But Jake pushes past the protesting med techs, toward the door and --
**EXT. AVATAR COMPOUND – DAY**
Jake emerges, blinking in the morning sun. He finds himself in the AVATAR COMPOUND -- a living and training area. Nearby, a couple of AVATARS are playing one-on-one in front of a (non-regulation height)

basketball net. Others go about their daily activities around the compound. Jake flexes his legs -- JUMPS -- and lands a little unsteadily, but his expression is joyful. He takes a few steps and breaks into a RUN. People are calling to him, somewhere, but he doesn't hear them -- he's running. RUNNING! He finds himself in the COMPOUND GARDEN, and stops amid neatly tended rows of ALIEN PLANTS. He looks down, wiggling his toes in the warm soil. Then inhales deeply – reveling in the alien smells -- earth, plants, the nearby forest. He looks at his bare footprint in the soil of an alien world.

**GRACE (O.S.):** Hey Marine!

Jake turns at the familiar voice to see -- A statuesque FEMALE AVATAR walking toward him. AVATAR GRACE is magnificent, with panther thighs, flat muscular stomach
and firm athlete's breasts. She wears shorts and a T-shirt. In human years she would be about 35.

**JAKE:** Grace?
**GRACE:** Well who'd you expect, numbnuts? Think fast!

She throws him a piece of Pandoran fruit, which he catches.

**GRACE:** Motor control is looking good.

Jake bites into the fruit, the juice running down his chin.

**NORM (O.S.):** Hey, check it out.

Jake turns to see NORM'S AVATAR posing like a bodybuilder -- chest shot, back shot, bi's.

**NORM:** I am a living god. (Cameron, 2009) Your quotation is very long. Do you need the entire quote? Add a full reference to it in the bibliography.

In analyzing the script and its visual representation (note the procession of texts a-la-Baudrillard (1981), I find this particular segment of the film script theory-heavy, and therefore, worthy of additional attention, as here we can find a little bit of everything.

What I mean is that in the preceding segment of the script we can find science, religion, mystery, drama, irony, sarcasm, even comedy. We can find a whole self-contained play. As I mentioned before, McLuhan's (1964) relevant reflection emphasizes that "instead of asking which came first the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg's idea for getting more eggs" (p. 12). I cannot help thinking that the above scene from *Avatar* presents us with a similar paradox. Which was first? Was it Jake

Sully's brother, Tom, who was trained to operate the avatar's body, the avatar body designed to cover him and make him disappear? Or was the whole story created to provide Jake Sully and his paralyzed dysfunctional body with a way to escape reality into simulation, and therefore hyperreality? What is certain, following this narrative, is that at an emotional level, the narrative of the story presented alludes to improvement, liberation, and happiness. Although, said happiness may be fleeting once Jake Sully returns to the limitations of his phenomenological reality, when he once again embodies his form of a corporeal prison. Which was first then? Was it the avatar, or the idea of having an avatar?

For this particular story, we can point out that, if we follow the logic of the narrative, the avatar constructed as an inanimate cyborg was first. The avatar was not only first, but it was a simulation (synthetic, we assume) of a "real" member of the Na'vi inhabiting the world of Pandora. However, as Jake Sully, in his human form, prepares to transgress into the unknown, we, as silent observers, disappear from his eyes as he relinquishes himself to the powers of technology. The cocoon that he enters is named "link" in the movie, and serves as the mediating machine capable of deconstructing his existence and separating consciousness from body. From a phenomenological perspective, we can imagine the power accompanying the ability to regain control of half of one's body, regardless of the new container—to say nothing of the fact that the new container is, indeed, much better than the one before.

It is also interesting to note that the movie presents us with a person who is clearly and openly unprepared. Jake Sully is not trained to operate the complexities associated with the avatar. Yet, the character Jake Sully does not only manage to leave his body

behind and engage in his new container in the same fashion that an animal begins walking as soon as it is born, but the avatar Jake Sully runs away from the constraints of technology. Jake's escape from technological restraint proves that endless hours of training[32] are useless as long as that internal energy, consciousness, or even spirit is capable of establishing what seems to be a natural connection with the blue puppet to become a spectacle in the fictive world of Pandora. In a matter of minutes, the protagonist Jake Sully manages to convince us that he was born—as opposed to educated—to operate the gigantic blue cyborg from its very innermost and sacred place. Interestingly enough, the way the movie is visually constructed to support the script represents the arrival of Jake Sully's consciousness in the form of a gaze. The avatar suddenly opens its eyes to reveal that the soulless creature now is alive and ready to exist at its full potential. In watching the movie, and now in writing about it, I wonder if the way the movie is constructed places a sense of consciousness right behind the eyes of the viewer, or if it was just me, and the "us that makes the I" that conjured such a connection. I think Cameron's *Avatar* is important to the construction of an ICEVORG. I find it to be most significant that—in spite of the story being undeniably fiction—Jake Sully transgressed boundaries between realities, worlds, and stories by means of using not one, but several media. An avatar therefore, and more specifically an ICEVORG, is a conduit, a message, and a medium—a medium that is capable of transgressing boundaries, but resorting to the act of disappearance to do it. Put differently, to move from reality to reality, we must live immersed, and fully participate in

[32] The character Norman claims to have more than 500 hundred hours, as opposed to the single hour that Jake invested in learning how to operate the machine.

the act of disappearance. This is crucial to comply with Baudrillard's (1981) fourth order, that of simulacra, and essential for understanding the sense of reality that evolves as part of postmodernity and posthumanism. I want to argue then that to transgress boundaries, we must be willing to disappear, and by virtue of our disappearance, be subject to an eternal yet mediated existence. I will define this concept as "virtual immortality"; it is a concept only possible in posthuman discourse, and it is the "reality" that we live on a daily basis.

To support this argument, I introduce the thoughts of Baudrillard (1981), where he talks about the disappearance of human beings from the world. Baudrillard argues that we have disappeared, rather than have become exhausted, exterminated, or extinct. He supports his argument by explaining that the human species, unlike any other living creature or natural phenomena, has been the only one that has "invented a specific mode of disappearance that has nothing to do with nature's law," which is perhaps "an art of disappearance" (p. 24). Baudrillard presents his argument by indicating that the real is no longer visible, as it has been obliterated by the progress of technology embodied in media, virtual reality, and electronic networks. He founds his claim on the reflection that the invention of the telescope allowed us to look beyond our senses into a world that was impossible to reach. He references Arendt to explain how the invention of a point of view outside the natural world became alienated by technology. All of a sudden reality, as we knew it, broke into pieces due to the possibility of seeing a new "reality" through the use of technology that was apparently unquestionable and undeniable.

For Arendt (1958), this alienation is the result of the use of a telescope (visual technology) to sever our existence from the constraints of our physical presence in space and time. In her words:

> This is the moment when human beings, while setting about analyzing and transforming the world, take their leave of it, while at the same time lending if force of reality. We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the same time as it begins to exist. (p. 255)

Arendt supports her argument by describing how the use of a tool—in this case, the telescope—allowed intellectuals to escape the constraints imposed by physical reality. It is important to note that she is talking about the transgression of boundaries as a process facilitated by technology. The assimilation of what I argue to be disruptive technology taken as factual dismantled what was considered the real. More importantly, it shifted the power and control of the truth from the Church to science, and by virtue of the change, a new order was created. The new order represented a new reality, where the previous one had to disappear and reemerge evolved in order to survive. Accepting the telescope as a form of bodily augmentation, an extension of the eye—or more precisely, the gaze, as McLuhan (1964) would argue—is key to understanding what Baudrillard would name the "Order of the Hyperreal," and his famous concept of simulacra (Norris, 2004).

Furthermore, it is important to establish a clear understanding of what an avatar provides, and how it is facilitated by technology, yet more importantly, by abstract thinking. Cyborgs, as opposed to avatars, do not marinate?? in the concept of disappearance. As a matter of fact, cyborgs are an undeniable form of bodily presence in

the physical world. As technology becomes one with the hosting body, cyborgs are—to a certain extent—enhanced forms of humans, but ones still subject to the limitations of the physical world.

In 1997, Kunzru interviewed Donna Haraway, arguably the mother of the scholarly definition of "cyborg," for *WIRED* magazine, where Haraway explains, once more, what a cyborg is. The article is important in that it functions as a bridge to translate—or decode—the complex and abstract concept of "cyborg," as has been constructed by scholars, into layman's terms. *WIRED* helped the world better understand what seemed to be stories pulled from the world of science fiction and inserted into everyday life. Kunzru opens his article by referencing popular characters, such as the human-looking machine from Cameron's (1984) *The Terminator*, starring actor Arnold Schawarzenegger as an assassin sent back in time to kill the future mother of the leader of the war against the machines, and thus prevent his birth. Cameron presents a futuristic world where machines have completely taken over, and are in a battle for total world domination. As appropriate as it may sound, Kunzru makes a conceptual mistake in selecting this reference. The Terminator is not a cyborg, for it has no human consciousness, just human flesh. In other words, the assassin looks like a human, but has no consciousness.

The article proceeds by describing Haraway as a down-to-earth, approachable human being who happens to declare herself a cyborg for the simple reason that, according to her, we have already been assimilated by contemporary technology, and by merely existing, we are already cyborgs. This idea goes hand in hand with posthuman theory. To a

certain extent, we cannot choose to *not* be cyborgs. In interpreting Haraway, Kunzru (1997) writes:

> But she's not talking about some putative future or a technologically advanced corner of the present. The cyborg age is here and now, everywhere there is a car or a phone or a VCR. Being a cyborg isn't about how many bits of silicon you have under your skin or how many prosthetics your body contains. It's about Donna Haraway going to the gym, looking at a shelf of carbo-loaded bodybuilding foods, checking out the Nautilus machines, and realizing that she's in a place that wouldn't exist without the idea of the body as high-performance. It's about athletic shoes. 'Think about the technology of sports footwear,' She says. 'Before the Civil War, right and left feet weren't even differentiated in shoe manufacture. Now we have a shoe for every activity.' It's about the 'interaction of medicine, diet, training practices, clothing and equipment manufacture, visualization and timekeeping.' (para. 3)

Haraway's words convey with a strong punch what a cyborg is: a human-made part-machine, part-network, part-human. Cyborgs are complex hybrids of meat and technology that do not surround us, in Kunzru's (1997) words, but "incorporate us" (para. 5). All the networks, he says, are "also inside us" (para. 6). We transform our bodies to move beyond the physical alteration that being a cyborg entails. By ingesting chemicals, and going to the gym on a daily basis, we long to create and recreate ourselves. We do this to gain some level of control in the process of creating our very own identity, our very own selves. Yet, the selves we create and construct are not cyborgs only; they go beyond, they push forward

into the realm of avatars and use them as a means to expand presence through disappearance. We are no longer responsible for a single complex "self," but for a self and a digital self. I will argue, therefore, that the digital self is a posthuman construct that departs from the idea of cyborg, and moves into the future, by means of ICEVORG.

It has been two years since the last time I wrote the preceding paragraph, and it has been quite a challenge to move back into research mode. Quite a serious chunk of life happened in between paragraphs, including but not limited to divorce, bankruptcy, and identity deconstruction, even relocation between the hemispheres. After several years of researching the construction of my very own avatar, I can attest to what I wrote before. Now, I understand that the act of disappearance was necessary to let the complex ideas I was working with root inside my brain and grow. I, as an avatar, have experienced the transformation associated with my identity. To a certain extent, I became the subject of my own discourse. I continue to define myself as a cyborg, a human hybrid that incorporates flesh and technology to generate what intends to be a unit of meaning defined as person. As I reached the final paragraphs of this chapter, my brain was a bowl of hot alphabet soup. Now, I am ready to continue.

# CHAPTER SIX

## From Avatar to Cyborg to ICEVORG

'How come you're not at the Hilton?'

She answered him by reaching back, between his thighs, and gently encircling his scrotum with thumb and forefinger. She rocked there for a minute in the dark, erect above him, her other hand on his neck. The leather of her jeans creaked softly with the movement. Case shifted, feeling himself harden against the Temperfoam. His head throbbed, but the brittleness in his neck seemed to retreat. He raised himself on one elbow, rolled, sank back against the foam, pulling her down, licking her breasts, small hard nipples sliding wet across his cheek. He found the zip on the leather jeans and tugged it down.

'It's okay,' she said, 'I can see.' [Sound of the jeans peeling down]. She struggled beside him until she could kick them away. She threw a leg across him and he touched her face.

Unexpected hardness of the implanted lenses. 'Don't,' she said, 'fingerprints.'

Now she straddled him again, took his hand, and closed it over her, his thumb along the cleft of her buttocks, his fingers spread across the labia. As she began to lower herself, the images came pulsing back, the faces, fragments of neon arriving and receding. She slid down around him and his back arched convulsively. She rode him that way, impaling herself, slipping down on him again and again, until they both had come, his orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors, and her inner thighs were strong and wet against his hips. – *The Neuromancer* (Gibson, 2000, p. 33)

The previous chapters focused on two key concepts that I combined to construct a new form of representation given birth in the interstices between concepts. I am mostly

interested in those seemingly empty spaces where unexpected things can happen. The crossing from one reality to another allows intellectual growth, but it can take place only when humans open their minds to the unknown. Moving from reality to fiction, and from fiction to worlds yet to be discovered, is, by far, one of the most fascinating scholarly undertakings that we can approach. This chapter will talk about crossovers, transitions, and unexpected turns that allow our imagination to flourish and evolve. I find text to be a powerful tool to pursue said challenge, and images the perfect tool to complete the journey. The function of this chapter of my dissertation is to mix, shake, and serve all words written before this in a hot bowl of alphabet soup. I want to invite you to entertain the idea of adding a seed of an image that wants to be. So, please bear with me as we go for the final ride.

I wish I could see your face right now, but I am not there, even though I am somehow present through the projection of my thoughts as words. I wish I could have been present to see your reaction to the introductory quote from the novel *Neuromancer* as an opening to the text that will follow. The reason behind what may be seen as a provocative act is to invoke in you, readers, an emotional reaction that does not have a physical body, only a posteriori physical manifestation. I am not interested in the specific reaction that was caused by your reading the paragraph, but simply that there was one. Whether your reaction was one of awe, surprise, repulsion, arousal, or any other is irrelevant. What I find fascinating is the capability of a text to incite such a reaction. In this case, I will argue that you just experienced what I call an "ICEVORG."

As I will explain in more detail an ICEVORG embodies the experience of that indelible relationship among text, intertext, and context that finds fertile ground in emotional response. Let me, however, go back into my story. *Neuromancer* is a seminal text for cyberculture studies, but it also applies to other fields of scholarly research due to the complex nature of its narrative. Presented to the world by William Gibson in 1984, the novel quickly became a foundational text for analyzing and understanding postmodern society from the perspective of literary studies. The novel's narrative evolves to explain how its characters live inside an electronic machine that is connected to an alternative reality. It ultimately argues that it is inside the machine—in the infamous Matrix—where the Real actually takes place, and where Baudrillard's (1981) simulation takes place. We inhabit that space using none other than avatars themselves (Stevens, 1996). Stevens even suggests that the Matrix itself is another avatar, writing:

> The characters of Gibson's *Neuromancer*… and eventually the matrix itself, when it comes to know itself, are all entities who live to one degree or another in the machine, in cyberspace, or to use Gibson's formulation, in the matrix of human knowledge 'from the banks of every computer in the human system' (p. 51). They are all, to put into play another of his frequently-used words, 'personalities.' Most are reproductions, digital representations (or manifestations) of someone who was already alive, already human, and in that sense already someone who thinks. (p. 15)

Stevens also observes that there are no boundaries between the machines and us, an idea that conjures at a subconscious level an emotion similar to those uneasy feelings experienced upon reading the introductory quote. As I continue to write the following

pages, I can attest that my mind has grown another body. I have become my very own ICEVORG, thanks to many years of painstaking construction. The machine has not gotten inside of me just yet, but it soon will. Given the opportunity, I would definitely turn myself into a cyborg, so that I could accommodate, in a better way, the ICEVORG I carry within. However, I must concentrate and reel my discourse back to avoid falling into the rabbit hole.

By now, the idea of what an ICEVORG is may be well-assimilated, but I think it is important to summarize where I stand—textually speaking—to establish order inside my wondering brain. In the last two chapters, I focused on defining what an avatar is; but, more importantly, I focused on reinforcing the notion that an avatar is not a cyborg or any other form of theoretical construct without a bodily presence. Even though this is a rather simplistic observation, I find it to be an important one. However, to continue, the basic premise stating that "a cyborg is not an avatar" must be granted theoretical validity, as it becomes the backbone of what an ICEVORG is.

I define "ICEVORG" as a conceptual construct derived from the intertextual space present among avatar, cyborg, medium, and message. It is a conceptual being, an illusory presence that cannot be denied existence since it is the subject of intellectual observation. More importantly, ICEVORG is a way to enter and experience the Real, or what is left of it. At the same time that it serves as a port of entry into the order of the Real, it also helps us to open our eyes to Gibson's (1984) Matrix, or what he calls the "consensual hallucination" (p. 5).

It is rather important to understand the etymological origin of the term "ICEVORG." ICEVORG is an acronym designed to combine the letter "I," representing the individual and its reflection, as was explained in the previous chapters. However, "I" also stands for intelligence, a crucial component of this particular intellectual construct; without it, any attempt to engage in any form of more complex and elaborate thought would not be possible. The letter "c" stands for cyberspace.

Even though the Internet is an undeniable experience for the average person, the validity of the internet as physical territory continues to be a demanding undertaking for the brain. To think of the Internet as a real territory provokes critical reflections on the implications of accepting it as such, primarily due to its lack of regulation by the general public (Cohen, 2007). Cohen explains that the "cyberspace" metaphor originated in science fiction, and then migrated into the legal discourse via the work of academic commentators. At that point, this conceptual space became the subject of scholar commentary, especially as it pertained to legal matters and the law. Regulating the space became a complicated matter, as there was no "real" space to regulate. But, at the same time, it was impossible to deny this space's existence, and the speed at which it affects our daily lives.

Even though conventional wisdom now rejects the initial exceptional claim that cyberspace is inherently freer than "real space," the belief that it is nonetheless inherently different has persisted. At the same time, however, court decisions in cases challenging unauthorized access to web-based information have invoked place- and space-based metaphors to demarcate virtual "property" (Cohen, 2007).

Some scholars argue that cyberspace is indeed a consensual hallucination, as Gibson (1984) describes in *Neuromancer*, especially when it comes to validating its status as a metaphorical space that is applicable (or not) to the fabric of reality. But, for others, the Internet "is simply a communication network, and the cyberspace metaphor distracts from doctrinally faithful and/economically rational policemaking" (Cohen, 2007, p. 211). However, the meaning that I am adopting for the construction of my proposed term, "ICEVORG," invokes the tradition of postmodernist cultural studies, which claims that the use of cyberspace as metaphor produces unexpected, and even undesired, consequences in the fields of politics and ideology. Cohen claims that interdisciplinary work (such as this dissertation), which is based on human cognition and philosophy of mind, chooses to use cyberspace as a metaphor because "our cognitive makeup dictates that we must" (p. 212). Cohen suggests an imagined relationship between "cyberspace" and "real" space, one that is expressed in the development of ideologies and desires to frame it. She then identifies three general categories of constructed spaces to express different social and psychological functions in the human consciousness:

> Utopia are imaginary places through which their designers articulate visions of ideal social ordering. Isotopia are constructed, whether deliberately or by force of habit, after the pattern of existing places. The interplay between the ideal and the real, and between the ideal and its opposite, the dystopia, are much explored topics. The ideal and the analogous, however, do not exhaust our narratives of place. (p. 211)

Cohen (2007) then identifies a third place, one which I am most interested in exploring since it is here that ICEVORGs are born and thrive. To construct this third place, she refers to Foucault (1967) and his description of a third type of place called "heterotopia," explaining that "he viewed [it] as peculiarly constitutive of distinct human societies" (p. 212). This peculiar conceptual space possesses the unique ability to establish a shared space where all the other forms can coexist. Yet, while utopia exists only in the imagination, heterotopia "are real spaces in which the ordinary rules of behavior are, in different ways, suspended to permit the enactment of a variety of processes and rituals that do not occur in ordinary spaces" (Cohen, 2007, p. 213).

Acknowledging "ICEVORGs" as inhabitants of heterotopia is very important for the success of their genealogy, and their subsequent evolution as theoretical creatures.

The letter "e" stands for "emotional," as well as for "electronic," as in "email," for instance. An ICEVORG must be, I argue, the representation of an emotional state of mind. Unlike cyborgs or avatars, it is of great importance that ICEVORGs enable an emotional response in the viewer or observer. This aspect may be the most challenging, yet the most sensible, aspect involved in the formation of an ICEVORG. Even though the name itself implies ice, what I wanted to convey when I designed the term was the message that ice is indeed an adaptable matter that once exists in a different state: liquid. The adaptability and endless capacity of water to change shape and form is vital to the construction of the concept of ICEVORG, and to its evolution into an embodied entity capable of crossing boundaries. Without the capacity to adapt and transgress spaces, an ICEVORG could not exist.

To further develop the idea of the role of the electric and electronic component in the ICEVORG, I must revisit McLuhan (1964), according to whom moving from the mechanical age (Benjamin, 1910) to the electronic age has procured a radical shift in our paradigms. We have changed our thought processes in the same manner that the system of production and communication has changed, from the mechanized and repetitive circular movement of the machine to the frantic and endless linear advancement of the electric current. McLuhan continues by claiming that we are able to observe such transformation in the time it takes us to react to messages, input, data, stimuli; yet, in spite of this fact, we continue to think in a fragmented way, in patterns of what he calls "the pre electric age" (p. 8). In McLuhan's words:

> Western man acquired from the technology of literacy the power to act without reacting. The advantages of fragmenting himself in this way are seen in the case of the surgeon who would be quite helpless if he were to become humanly involved in his operation. We acquired the art of carrying out the most dangerous social operations with complete detachment. But our detachment was a posture of noninvolvement. In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we need to participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. (p. 30)

McLuhan (1964) touches on a point that helps me construct the conceptual framework for the ICEVORG when he explains how we cannot escape our involvement in the electronic age. This is clearly manifested in certain decisions we may (or may not) take regarding our

position on contemporary communication technologies. What I am referring to is accepting or denying the extension of our consciousness into the realm of the consensual hallucination (Gibson, 1984) we call the Internet. At this point in my development of hypertextual communication, avoiding involvement in said technology is almost impossible, so impossible it would be difficult not to label it as a potential act of disappearance and revelry. This act of "living off the grid" has even become the subject of a reality TV show, which is observed with awe by those who are not a part of it. The TV reality show "Risking It All" is produced and presented by The Learning Channel (TLC), an American satellite and cable network focused on family matters. According to its Wikipedia entry, TLC initially focused on educational and learning content, but by 2001, the network began to primarily focus on reality series involving lifestyles, family life, and personal stories. As of February 2015, approximately 95 million American households receive TLC (Seidman, 2015). The goal of "Risking It All" is explained on its official website as follows:

> Escaping the pressures of modern society proves to be an unforgettable and life-changing adventure as three families set out to live off the land. These families not only unplug their smartphones and tablets, but they also give up electricity and running water for a life off the grid in a drastic last resort to reconnect with each other. From attempting to save their marriage to dealing with family illness to regaining control of their relationships, each family has a different reason for embarking on the journey of a lifetime. The three families pack up their homes, say their good-byes to loved ones, and prepare for the challenges that come with

> trading in the luxuries of modern-day society for a self-sufficient life (TLC, n.d., para. 1)

Today's viral dissemination of reality shows relates to McLuhan's (1964) technocratic prophesies as he explains how the flood of information, and the speed at which we are covered by it, has created a spectacle from which there is no escape. As McLuhan claims,

> The Theater of the Absurd dramatizes this recent dilemma of Western man, the man of action who appears not to be involved in the action. Such is the origin and appeal of Samuel Beckett's clowns. After three thousand years of specialist explosion and of increasing specialism and alienation in the technological extensions of our bodies, our world has become compressional by dramatic reversal. As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teenager, and some other groups. They can no longer be contained, in the political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media. This is the Age of Anxiety for the reason of the electric implosion that compels commitment and participation, quite regardless of any "point of view." The partial and specialized character of the viewpoint, however noble, will not serve at all in the electric age, [i]n a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a

> shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. [M]any people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. (p. 33)

This lengthy quote is necessary to explain several aspects of the ICEVORG. Electronic media are the imaginary space where ICEVORGs live and thrive. Without electronic media, it would not be possible for them, for us, to survive as electronic beings that transgress media, and therefore expand beyond the limitations of our physical bodies. As a matter of fact, it is interesting to observe that there is parallel reality supported by new technologies of communication that exists right now—a reality that is far superior to the one we lived only a century ago. However, the shift in technologies and the incorporation of electric input has rendered a society that lives, as McLuhan (1964) explains, in constant anxiety and depression. We must feed our bodies with daylight, and our brains with nightlight, to maintain this crazy pace that leads to nowhere but into our minds, and into the electric grid we call the Internet. The anxiety McLuhan mentions becomes integral to ICEVORGs in terms of emotional input. We, as humans with augmented realities at our disposal, have yet to learn how to negotiate the plethora of emotions resulting from the emergence of new technologies incorporated into our old primitive bodies. We are not quite cyborgs, but our expectations as society have long surpassed the need to be integrated with technology.

The anxiety brought on by the smart phone, to name one electronic medium, is beyond comparison. It has become a phenomenological experience. We spend a considerable amount of time checking our so-called smartphones, though that moniker is highly questionable. The electronic theater of the absurd we carry so close to our heart has no equivalent in the past. At no point in the history of the world have we devoted so much time to a particular device. Books have usually been limited to a privileged segment of the population. The incorporation of TV sets, as well as the telephone, into daily life, even into the family, made a great impact and changed society for good. The same effect was created by the printing press centuries before, yet the impact of cellular telephony has surpassed that of the internet itself. The impact I am talking about, and the one that makes the "e" in ICEVORG as important as the other constituents, carries with it a very peculiar responsibility; the "e" component does not only refer to electric, but to emotional. The "e," purposefully situated in the middle of the word, sharing the space with the "v," is the factor that keeps our humanity protected yet vulnerable. Emotional input is what continues to separate us, humans, from machines.

According to Miller (2012), by the year 2025, more than 5 billion people on our planet will be using ultra-broadband, sensor-rich smartphones with capabilities beyond those of today's iPhones, Androids, and Blackberries:

> How could such humble little devices have such power to advance our science? [psychology] A $700 iPhone doesn't look like much compared with a $2 million MRI brain scanner. Yet smartphones are becoming very common, powerful, and multifunctional all-in-one lifestyle technology, a sort of electronic Swiss Army

> knife (Barkhuss & Polichar, 2011). Worldwide, mobile broadband users (who typically use smartphones) numbered about 370 million in 2009, 720 million in 2011, and will reach 1.8 billion in 2014; worldwide sales of new smartphone were about 175 million in 2009, 350 million in 2011, and will reach 700 million in 2015 (Portio Research, 2011). By 2025, most of the projected eight billion people in the world will carry smartphones. (p. 221)

Even though these devices are not designed to collect data for research, the fact that every action is recorded in the device itself, as well as in the network, presents the possibility for understanding emotions in the relationship that has emerged between humans and the electronic devices that are quickly and progressively becoming augmentations of our bodily existence. The seemingly innocuous and now ubiquitous, sleek contraption has become the sidekick of every human, homosexual or heterosexual, young or old, earning a living wage. The type of person possessing the device does not matter anymore, as long as one has a pair of hands and a pocket, one can carry an extra limb that promises far superior abilities than any of our other organs ever will.

Considering the fact that I am arguing that the "e" component in the conceptual construct that I named "ICEVORG" refers to electronic and emotion, I find myself obliged to incorporate a rather succinct, yet focused, definition of emotions for the purpose of my study. To do so, I am making use of the work of Rei Terada (1999), who approaches emotions from the perspective of comparative literature. In his article entitled "Imaginary Seductions: Derrida and Emotion Theory," Terada defines emotions from a philosophical perspective by indicating that

> [t]he main stream of Anglo-American philosophy holds that emotions are both physiological experiences and mental judgments, but that the character of an individual emotion stems from the specific beliefs and desires involved in a given judgment. …[E]motions are seen as blends of feelings and thoughts, and in particular beliefs. …[M]any twentieth-century philosophers agree that, in addition to being feelings, emotions have to be "about" something. Like intentions, emotions take objects and entail beliefs about them. To this extent, they are not so much sensations that happen to me as they are conceptions I express. (p. 195)

It is of interest to my dissertation to provide a clear understanding of what emotions are because they play a major role in the formation of ICEVORGs inasmuch as they are the main reason why we, as ICEVORGs' parents, operators, and shepherds, give them so much of our attention and care.

Interestingly enough, Terada (1999) draws upon phenomenology,more specifically Husserl's work on intentionality—to support his arguments. Husserl, as Terada notes, asserts that emotions come into being through their intentional connections to objects. In his own words, Terada explains:

> Husserl distinguishes "feeling-acts (emotions) from "feelingsensations" such as bodily pain. And Husserl solves the problem of our not always knowing what our emotions are about by posting formal objects for them. If an object is vague or indeterminate, that is no obstacle to its being a kind of algebraic object: here we are dealing with intentional experiences. …This formal approach remains important in philosophy today. …Philosophers like to emphasize cognitive contents in this way

> because once we grant that emotions belong to intentional discourse, we can evaluate their suitability and hold people responsible for emotive reactions. …But in doing so they describe a surprising consequence: the conceptual nature of emotion itself excludes expression. Emotional conceptually opens the space of theatricality and imagination, rendering our own emotions accessible only through the acts of imagination and identification by means of which we feel for others. We are left with emotion that is inherently second order. Because expression inherits a Platonic suspicion of representation, we assume that successful emotion is immediate; second-order emotion sounds like "emotion" in quotation marks, a mere miming of emotion. That is why Jameson believes that Andy Warhol's washed-out images, suspended in a world of mediation, can no longer move us very much. (pp. 196-197)

In applying Terada's commentary to my dissertation, I must add that what makes us human in today's simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981) is the maintenance of our connection to emotions. Emotions are, by far, an inherently human characteristic that continues to be the subject of study, as well as the pivotal theme of cybernetics, robotics, and the entire genre of Sci-fi literature and film. All of these fields and genres continue to tackle the idea of incorporating emotions into the different machines we continue to design for the perennial promise of societal betterment. Ironically, the more we attempt to inject the machine with emotion, the further away we become, for we cannot go beyond mimicry.

In addition, and returning to the discourse on smartphones, it is important to note that one of the causes of our anxiety, and our desire, is the ability to convey emotions, true

emotions, using our smartphones as mechanisms of pleasure, where we can deposit our virtual seeds to grow an electronic Self. In order to avoid sounding too shallow, I am compelled to add Derrida's (1976) thoughts on identity. Derrida suggests a fundamental point of departure for the birth of ICEVORGs when he says,

> I am not myself without an imaginary self that mediates me, and it is through that self that real emotions get felt. Such emotions require an explanation that expression cannot provide. They are neither intentional nor expressive—not because they don't have objects, and not because we don't feel them on purpose, but because whether they are directed at objects or not, and whether we feel them on purpose or not, they take place on mental stage peopled by virtual identities. (as cited in Terada, 1999, p. 197)

Emotions, I must emphasize, are what keep us human in the midst of the flood of technological progress. As technology continues to evolve and spread to every possible field, from agricultural harvesting machines to the pharmaceutical industry, a decisive element that technology cannot reach—despite endless attempts—is the world of emotions. Perhaps one day we will be able to design and master the technocrat Zeus, an emotional, fully functional, and fully autonomous robot. Yet, the question remains: What for? What would be the function of such an accomplishment? To mimic the human construct we call God? I am much more cynical than what I am expressing in these lines, but I do not think that pursuing the idea of creating a "flawed"—as opposed to flawless—being would be an accomplishment at all; it would be nothing more than a demonstration of our unlimited stupidity. That being said, I must acknowledge that we are walking on that same path,

heading in that same direction, and the conceptual creature I am delivering with my words, the ICEVORG, is, in a paradoxical way, my contribution to such nonsense. Good self-critique.

Continuing the explanation of the etymology of my proposed term, the next letter in the acronym is "v," and it stands, once more, for two concepts. The first concept is "visual," and the other, "virtual." An ICEVORG, up until this point, has been an intelligent computational construct that exists where emotions are expressed and maintained, in the interstices between our brain and electronic communication. The next component is the visual construct and the virtual space.

On the relationship between image and emotion, in his groundbreaking treatise *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1980) tackles the complexities of the semiotics and semantics of images. When he describes a photograph (I exchange the term "photograph" for "image" in an attempt to include any form of constructed image), Barthes explains that constructed images reproduce ad infinitum. However, the meaning itself can be reproduced only once, and more importantly, it is never the object itself that matters, but the emotional response it conjures in the viewer. As Barthes puts it,

> In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, This (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the Tuche, the Ocassion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression. In order to designate reality Buddhism says sunya, void; but better still: tathata, as Alan Watts

> has it, the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so; that means that in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, look! But says nothing else; a photograph cannot be transformed (spoken) philosophically; it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope. (pp. 8-9)

When I apply Barthes's reflections to an ICEVORG, I argue that the intentionality of my proposed construct is the same as that of the photograph: to work as a conduit between meaning and referent, between signifier and signified. An ICEVORG, just like Barthes's child, points to its referent. However, I must indicate that an ICEVORG does not limit its existence to visual representation in the space and time where it exists. Unlike a physical analog photograph, which results from the application of a particular chemical process on a prepared concrete surface, an ICEVORG does not need physicality to exist. I must reinforce the idea that ICEVORGs thrive in the interstices among their constituents. Those interstices may easily be electronic, or take place inside the brain in the form of emotional expressions. An ICEVORG must include emotion since it is part of her very nature. Freeland (2007) explains that a key aim of images constructed with the intention to depict the likeness of a particular person is to serve also as a conduit to connect the viewer with the person being observed. The function of this connection is to convey the emotional input that the subject painted (or photographed) expresses in order to construct his or her persona. As Freeland writes,

> A key aim of portraitures depicting the sitters is to convey his or her "person-ness". This goal is central to our modern conception of the portraits since "at the core lies

> the relation of the viewer and viewed" (Podro, 1998 p. 106). We could describe this aim by saying that the painter seeks to convey the subject's unique essence, character, thoughts and feelings, interior life, spiritual condition, individuality, personality, emotional complexity. Just how this is done involves use of the varied techniques of portraiture to show many significant external aspects of a person, such a physiognomy, in addition to the depiction of features such as status and class through the use of props, clothing, pose, and stance, composition and artistic style and medium. (p.98)

When constructing an ICEVORG, the aims that Freeland (2007) describes become tools for success. The more control one can have in the construction of an ICEVORG, the better the result. Of course, there are many aspects one cannot control in the construction of any visual representation. Yet, as times change, and technology becomes more and more capable and powerful, it is much easier to mimic reality to the point of no return. To a certain extent, we have already surpassed that frontier in terms of technology, as in the case of Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar*. However, as a collective consciousness in constant evolution, we are not there yet. What I mean is that in spite of having forced the majority of the population to become candid photographers and empirical designers and artists, the overall quality of the images constructed and shared through electronic media has not reached industry standards. Put differently, we, as a collective, have not assisted in the construction of a convincing virtual reality just yet. The case of Facebook may be the first attempt to construct such a reality, but given its relative infancy, there is still a long road ahead. However, I must stress that we—collectively, as an interconnected society—are not

doing such a bad job. ICEVORGs are constructed on a daily basis, and each and every one of them carries with it the original intention to contain and procure an emotional response in the viewer. Freeland (2007) further explains that a good portrait ultimately

> conveys the person's subjectivity. The [subject] should appear to be autonomous and a distinct person, with unique thoughts and emotions. As a persona the [subject] is embodied, but the self is there "in" the embodiment, and the artist must "realize", "concretize" or "objectify" it in the image. (p. 98)

Freeland (1998) points out, yet again, the importance of capturing emotion, and the complexities associated with such a challenging task as capturing it in the surface of an illusory construct: an image.

It becomes a daunting task to capture emotion in a conceptual entity that will be fixed in time and space. As we can see, in spite of the amazing development of current technology, super computers, smaller and faster computers, interconnectivity—a smaller village as McLuhan (1964) predicted in the seventies—we continue to search for meaning through the deployment of images that attempt to "touch" us and to "move" us in emotional ways.

However, it is fascinating that regardless of how hard we try, and how well we control technology, there is a "something" inside the image that will always place the image beyond our control. Barthes (1981) named this something "punctum," explaining it through the analysis of images captured to deliver emotional input. He defines "punctum" by contrasting this term with another construct he calls "studium," detailing both concepts in these terms:

What I feel about these photographs [he is describing images from a news publication] I can of course, take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture. What I feel about these photographs derives from an *average* affect, almost from a certain training. I did not know a French word which might account for this kind of human interest, but I believe this word exist in Latin: it is *studium*, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study," but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions. The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This is it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that is also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut,

> little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (p. 26)

In interpreting Barthes's (1981) conception of the punctum, it is interesting to read his original text to better understand how he arrives at the word he chooses to convey such a complex meaning. The most important reason for reverting to the original text, however, is to fully comprehend what he calls the studium, since it can be observed with regularity in everyday life in the form of advertisements, for instance. We are living in times where the image overwhelms our daily lives. It is hard to believe that we have moved from cave paintings to Times Square, where images are so abundant that before we realize it, we are one more image projected onto gigantic displays of liquid crystal communicated at the speed of light. My amazement ceases to be subdued as I think about the infinite studia constructed by the powers of advertising and mass media on a daily basis. Isn't it amazing and overwhelming to accommodate the idea that we departed from scenes of hunters and animals and arrived at today's Instagram? Or Facebook? Flickr? All of a sudden, we have been forcefully compelled to become photographers, artists, image-makers, and designers. Yet, it is precisely because of this consequence of technology that the concept of punctum becomes relevant. Punctum is the soul of the image, which cannot be controlled in its construction. It is there. It is what pictures want, as Mitchell (2005) would claim. Images want to be, to exist, and to be seen. However, not all images have souls, or punctums; only certain ones carry this aura within. One could argue that the punctum is that unforeseen, ethereal, unexpected element, the monster that we bring to life; the punctum is the fiend,

the monster, the wretch that takes on a life of its own, as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein would concur.

Accordingly, I have chosen to throw the notion of punctum into the theoretical melting pot, in which I am concocting the ICEVORG. ICEVORGs, therefore, must seek to contain a punctum, while keeping in mind that a punctum is inherently uncontrollable; therefore, this is something the ICEVORG must do on its own. The quest for the punctum is how the dissertation gains its status as poetry and mystery. As creators of the punctum, we cannot help but aspire for punctums to break the boredom of our images, to land on our constructs as butterflies land on the flowers they so choose.

In elaborating upon the concept of punctum, Jenkins (2013) argues that what Barthes introduces to the academic world with his notion of punctum is not a singular concept or entity. Rather, punctum is a multiplicity of instances because its presence allows viewers to depart from the surface of the image and enter into virtual worlds, powered by their own thinking. In her words:

> Barthes's notion of the punctum is plural; there are multiple punctums, each of which is a punctuation in mode transforming the spatiotemporal parameters of perception, leading viewers on an adventure into blind fields and often raising metaphysical questions about space, time, life, and death. (p. 576)

Jenkins indicates that Barthes (1982) outlines two instances where punctums emerge: one that references life in the act of puncturing, with the other referencing its opposite, death, by discovering the pricking wound in the reading of an image. She writes,

> Given his phenomenological commitment and ontological desire to learn at all costs what Photography was in itself many readers understand the punctum as exclusive to photography, making any attempt to expand the concept to other media seem dubious, at best. (p. 577)

Jenkins (2013) argues that applying punctum to other media "seem dubious" (p. 577) to stress that puctums are not found in animation or cinema as constructs, given the level of control over images in those media. In other words, punctums cannot be created, only observed. Punctums, Jenkins continues, are subjective in nature because they create a paradox through a conceptual rupture of a static image, and that paradox's importance relies on the fact that it "points to the potential variances in punctums, variances permitting the expansion to other media" (p. 579). Jenkins then further develops the idea of the subjective in the punctum by stating that:

> [T]he depiction of the punctum as subjective is somewhat misleading because the punctum is about affect, and effect, according to recent theorists drawing on Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is presubjective. Emotion is a subjective response, experienced and acknowledged by the subject, but affect is distinct from emotion… …In other words, affects are the lived, embodied sensations of experience prior to the subject's rational and emotional responses to affecting and being affected. (p. 580)

In applying the preceding ideas to the ICEVORG, I argue that one of the goals of an ICEVORG—if not its main goal—is to create punctums as they move, spatiotemporally, from media to media, and to create these punctums as true experiences lived by the

creators of ICEVORGs and ICEVORGs in their own right. Barthes (1981) demonstrates the affective nature of the punctum when he writes:

> In this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an animation. The photograph itself is in no way animated… but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure. (p. 20)

This last reflection on animation, and how it fits into the fabric of what an ICEVORG is, leads into the next component of the ICEVORG acronym: the letter "v," the virtual component.

Considering all the preceding scholars and theories utilized in my dissertation, from Baudrillard to Haraway to Barthes, I throw the notion of the virtual into the mix in order to satisfy the main goal of my dissertation. The main goal of my dissertation is to offer a new conceptual living form that results from the mating, interbreeding, transgression, and why not, resistance of the previously visited concepts that give birth to it.

Even though the field of virtual reality today constitutes a vast and expansive sea of textual interpretations, I see myself obliged to throw my creation into the wild waters of the storm, while teaching it at the same time how to float. It is important that the ICEVORG is viewed not as a theoretical construct only, but as a creature in its embryonic stage. The creature I am proposing lives and feeds off of the capacity to move from one medium to the next, and back again. Such flexibility in movement is possible thanks to what I will theorize in the next pages as the blood of cyberspace, where I describe the role of hypertextual communication as it relates to the ICEVORG. To better contextualize

where exactly I am planting my seeds, so to speak, I would like to briefly describe the parallel reality we call the Internet.

In 1968, an electronic network became readily available to the public. It was opened to anybody who owned a computer and had access—via modem—to the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET). Developed by the United States Department of Defense during the Cold War, ARPANET stood as the world's first operational interchange of information and the predecessor of the global Internet. Immediately following its debut, ARPANET invited discussions of cyberspace.

*Cyberspace* is derived from the term *cybernetics*, which was coined by mathematician Norbert Wiener to define "[t]he science of control and communications in the animal and machine" (Manovich, 1995, p. 251). Wiener used this term to describe the control of moving missiles in navigable space. Science fiction writer William Gibson then deployed the term in his 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, and thus the idea of cyberspace was born. In Gibson's cyberspace, the body is adjustable in every possible way, and reality is defined as merely a fragile perception. Similarly, time is defined only by moments. These moments are shared, according to Gibson, by millions of people around the world, who live outside the screen—cyberspace—but are perceived as part of it.

Today, this shared perception through cyberspace is typified by a highly complex tapestry of electronic characters, signs, and symbols, mediated by hypermedia machines. This new medium of communication is changing the way we live, learn, and love. Its transforming power demands a reconstruction of paradigms, which are more adequately adjusted to the fast-paced electronic evolution of human and machine.

However, as early as 1945,Vannevar Bush theorized about the influence that individualized electronic technology had on daily life. He introduced the idea of an individual, private device, capable of immense organized storage, and called it "memex." In her own words a *memex* is "a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility" (p. 45). Bush also reflects upon the convergence of different media in the small electronic device she refers to as "memex." Her prophetic words read as follows:

> Man cannot hope fully to duplicate this mental process artificially, but he certainly ought to be able to learn from it. In minor ways he may even improve, for his records have relative permanency. The first idea, however, to be drawn from the analogy concerns selection. Selection by association, rather than by indexing, may yet be mechanized. One cannot hope thus to equal the speed and flexibility with which the mind follows an associative trail, but it should be possible to beat the mind decisively in regard to the permanence and clarity of the items resurrected from storage." (p. 42)

Her description of a general shared trail of information foreshadowed, to a certain extent, what would later become the Internet. It could be argued that Bush (1945) is describing the basic foundation for the Google enterprise when she writes: "There is a new profession of trail blazers, those who find delight in the task of establishing useful trails through the enormous mass of the common record" (p. 46).

Her vision of technology changing the conceptual indexing and sharing of information also includes an expected degree of interdisciplinary conflict. Such conflict

results, she claims, from different professionals sharing a common space. Further into her prescient essay, she questions the change in the perception of reality that these new forms of human interaction demand. She describes the potential brain reactions these electronic machines stimulate by changing the mode of communication from mechanical to what Bush (1945) calls "electric vibrations" (p. 43). Bush shows, however, a high concern for the fragmentation of our perception of reality:

> [B]ut who would now place bounds on where such a thing may lead? In the outside world all forms of intelligence whether of sound or sight, have been reduced to the form of varying currents in an electric circuit in order that they may be transmitted. Inside the human frame exactly the same sort of process occurs. Must we always transform from mechanical movements in order to proceed from one electrical phenomenon to another? It is a suggestive thought, but it hardly warrants prediction without losing touch with reality and immediateness. (p. 47)

Bush's keen visions of the future demonstrate how correct she was in observing that these electronic devices, or hypermedia machines, open the possibility for the unlimited systematic exchange of indexed information. What she fails to see is that the loss of touch with reality she refers to does not result from physical electric waves inside the human brain alone, but from the way we symbolically construct identity.

Almost 30 years after Bush's work, Nelson (1974) described a world where the computer is considered a very special device, "a dream machine" (p. 21). He argues against the emerging need for trained specialists to operate computers and electronic devices, suggesting that computers use "technology that is bound only by the limits of our

dreams" (p. 307). Nelson's intention is to remove the magic aura placed upon all electronic devices as highly technical machines, and take them down from the pedestal on which technocrats place them. He empowers people to consider all electronic devices as tools to express ideas, to build plans, and to propel dreams into reality. Nelson stresses the importance of computers because they matter more than people think or want. Nelson urges us to realize their role in society when he claims that computers matter because

> we live in media, as fish live in water... (Many people are prisoners of the media, many are manipulators, and many want to use them to communicate artistic visions.) But today, at this moment, we can and must design the molecules of our new water, and I believe the details of this design matter very deeply. (p. 306)

Nelson theorizes "water" as the medium that allows electronic communication to take place. One could argue that this already has an abstract form, and, more importantly, a name. It is called hypertext.

According to Moulthrop (1991), Nelson coined the term "hypertext" to describe the blood, so to speak, of this new medium for expressing thoughts and exchanging life. Hypertext differs from intertext on one front: the latter is an intellectual construct, the former, a living entity. The construction of intellectual discourse in each one of these media of thought representation does not change. What changes is the way one interacts with and generates them. Moulthrop describes Nelson as a visionary who "...foresees a renovation of culture, a unification of discourse, a reader-and-writer's paradise where all writing opens itself to/in the commerce of ideas" (p. 695). His observation of Nelson's hypertext could not be more precise, especially when it comes to his comments of the

commodification of ideas. Hypertext is indeed the blood of the electronic network; without it, the system would collapse. Imagine how the World Wide Web would be perceived without hypertext. The Web would quickly turn into Egyptian hieroglyphs, prior to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone.

Nelson's (1974) request to consider computers as integral components of daily life was fully realized in the 1970s. Computers and other media machines quickly flooded the market place. In the 1980s and 1990s**,** Nelson's "dream machines" were offered to the public as electronic portable devices capable of producing everything the mind could think of. They were information containers promising to "do it all," using hypertext to mediate between the electronic devices and the people who began to become dependent on them.

In 1995, a magazine ad announced the Intel processing chip (Figure 19). The ad shows a personal computer in the center of a clean, white space. The advertising copy introduces an electronic machine that provides everything but the kitchen sink, from multimedia presentations, to financial plans, to face-to-face communication, to, ultimately, the unlimited sharing of ideas. By the end of the Twentieth Century, hypertext was the blood flowing through all electronic devices connected to the Net. Hypermedia machines were taken for granted, as they were considered not only liberating tools of expression, but augmentations of one's body.


Figure 19: Intel Inside. Advertising art. 1995. Artstor/The Image Gallery .

According to Bolter (2001), the electronic medium "allows complete graphic freedom: the writer may ultimately control each pixel on the screen representing letters"; and he adds that "...the computer encourages the democratic feeling among its users that they can serve as their own designers" (p. 682). However, in spite of all this promised freedom, on the other side of the printed advertisement, a revealing form is conspicuously placed. This allows viewers to sneak a peek into the main internal component of the mighty machine: its plastic green brain. It entices the viewer to consider the possibility of ownership, not only of the electronic object as a tool to work and play with, but as a direct and safe passage to the acquisition of power. The famous Intel chip is depicted on the page, in

combination with text underneath that poses a provocative question: “Do you have the power?” This seemingly harmless inquiry capitalizes on Francis Bacon’s maxim, “Knowledge is power,” brought to intellectual discourse five years earlier.

The introduction of the personal computer into nearly every home paved the way for the parallel world of the virtual, where the avatar and cyborg both live. In her article “Looking toward Cyberspace: Beyond Grounded Sociology,” Sherry Turkle (1999) argues that when we see ourselves in the reflection created by the shining surface of any electronic device, we see ourselves differently. By the year 1984, Turkle was already referring to the machine as a “second self” (p. 643), yet after a decade of research, she went from explaining the identity of one-person-one-machine to the immense collective of people that make the Internet. The Internet, in her words,

> links millions of people together in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities. In Cyberspace we are learning to live in virtual worlds. We may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well. (p. 643)

According to Coyne (1994), virtual reality [VR] is a computer that represents sensory information and feedback with the intention of producing a convincing illusion that the user is immersed in an artificial world that exists only inside the computer. When comparing virtual reality to cyberspace, I must clarify that ICEVORGS are conceptual entities that live in between these two constructs, entities that have not been limited to or

by the borders of VR. At the same time, VR is not an integral part of cyberspace, and both VR and cyberspace require avatars and cyborgs that may live in one or the other space. On the other hand, ICEVORGS, having a more fluid and adaptable nature, may dive into one or both arenas to communicate and search for emotive affect. However, the challenge of emerging media lies with the development of identity in the collective. In other words, the true challenge of our times is how one becomes unique and special in an endless configuration of zeros and ones.

Turkle (1999) elaborates on her description of cyberspace by stating that it procures experiences that challenge what we traditionally call "identity" by allowing each one of us, cyberspace inhabitants, the possibility to live multiple parallel lives. She writes:

> Online life is not the only factor that is pushing [identities] in this direction, there is no simple sense in which computers are causing a shift in the notions of identity. It is, rather, that today's life on the screen dramatizes and concretizes a range of cultural trends that encourage us to think of identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility. (p. 643)

In addition, I want to push a bit further to conceive of cyberspace as a gargantuan, electronic, living and thriving organism that feeds off of us and our ever-growing need to stay connected to the source. It reminds me of ants and the way they work for their queen, and in doing so, obliterate their own individual identity. The monster we have created, I will argue, needs blood in the same way we need it: as a constant supply to stay alive. The difference here, however, is that cyberspace's blood is electronic and textual—we call it

"hypertext"—and it runs through the veins of the monster that we, following in the steps of Mary Shelley's genius, have created.

When Victor Frankenstein arrives, at the age of seventeen, at the University of Ingolstadt, he is afraid and doubtful. The first professor he talks to is M. Krempe, who teaches natural philosophy. Professor Krempe is characterized as the personification of discipline; he is old, wise, and ensures that knowledge is well-preserved and safely stored. Krempe is really a powerful figure within the institution. At first, Professor Krempe is friendly and welcoming. However, when Frankenstein shares with him the boundaries of his academic knowledge—limited to only a few authors—Krempe bursts into scholarly wrath. "Nonsense," Krempe says, "every instant that you have wasted on those books is utterly and entirely lost" (Shelley, 1818, p. 31). Then, he concludes, "My dear Sir, you must begin your studies entirely anew" (Shelley, 1818, p. 29). Frankenstein walks back home, concerned and quiet, pondering the professor's comments. Krempe is, after all, a university professor, someone to look up to, a powerful figure. Pensive and somewhat intimidated, Frankenstein walks back home with a comprehensive list of books that defines, according to Professor Krempe, what counts as knowledge, and what is important for the discipline.

During the next few days, the young Frankenstein hears about another instructor who teaches chemistry, Professor M. Waldman. Mary Shelley characterizes Waldman as mature, wise, relaxed, reassuring, and open-minded. He is described as benevolent and kind. When the young Victor approaches him, he explains, again, the limited breadth of his academic knowledge, and he includes now another component in his introduction: his lack

of discipline. When Waldman hears the book titles that Frankenstein now timidly verbalizes, he praises him and acknowledges the important value of such "scholarship." Professor Waldman encourages Frankenstein not to let his curiosity abandon him, and to pursue several disciplines at once; he says, "I am happy... to have gained a disciple; and if your application equals your ability, I have no doubt of your success" (Shelley, 1818, p. 29).

One could argue that Professor Waldman's encouragement of a multidisciplinary approach to education provides the most fitting environment for the story to evolve. Professor Waldman's words ultimately preview the perfect arena for Victor Frankenstein to attain the unattainable: to create life, a task he accomplishes as a result of intertextuality, as well as his interdisciplinary approach. Ironically, the novel presents interdisciplinarity as Frankenstein's greatest failure, characterizing Victor Frankenstein as a great and sound example of a Ph.D. student running away from his own creation. Are we little Frankensteins pretending to bring new ancient ideas to life? The answer to this question is hiding in between the lines of theory and practice, history and innovation, text, intertext and hypertext. We could venture to imagine, for a moment, that Victor Frankenstein decides to embrace the discipline suggested by Krempe, while dismissing Waldman's encouragement to pursue interdisciplinarity. This slight change in events would have meant that the eloquent creature, thoughtful fiend, and inspirational monster would have never been born. This sequence of events would, consequently, create not only a sad void in the history of literature, but it would also prevent the use of a powerful metaphor—one

that has helped us understand, more profoundly, the ways of the world through intertextuality.

Key to understanding all the content that will follow is the prefix "inter." "Inter" denotes reciprocity and connectivity. It represents a stream of data flowing in between the prefix and the word to which it is attached. Interestingly enough, it is originally meant to connote something that is both buried and alive. This semiotic something is underground, interned "into the earth," "enterrado"; however, it keeps its living and organic qualities intact to allow for growth and expansion. *Interblend*, *international*, and *interdependent* are just a few examples of the expressive power that this prefix imparts. Following this train of thought, *interdisciplinary* would then imply constant coordinated action and communication among elements that belong to one or more disciplines. According to Moran (2010), interdisciplinarity is any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines. It is always transformative in some way, and it is constantly producing "new forms of knowledge" (p. 16). The new forms of knowledge Moran describes refer more broadly to evolving ways of interaction between different bodies of knowledge. When literature is combined with theater, for instance, a new form of knowledge emerges in the same way that it does when geometry and music engage in dialogue. It is important to consider, nonetheless, that these exchanges of action, which result in constructive dialogue, require a medium to complete their transformative process. The medium allowing different academic disciplines to interact results—similar to Shelley's fiend—in a construct-creature. This abstract intellectual entity, organic in nature, has gone through an intense process of evolution that has taken several thousand years, innumerable

bloodsheds, constant negotiations, and many persuasive myths that result in a collection of letters we refer as "text."

A text is comprised of a collection of graphics individually called letters. Each one of them stands firmly on the surface of the medium to represent a sound. Collectively, letters comprise the alphabet, and endure the passage of time due to systematic organization by the institutions in power (Foucault, 1977). Alphabets form words, and words, endless sentences, thanks to a tight yet flexible set of rules (syntax), and more importantly, thanks to agreement on their use and implementation as a means to collect, store, and deliver knowledge. The concept of the alphabet as abstract representation of the spoken language is a phenomenon that prevailed in Western thought as an integral component of culture. The alphabet constitutes the flesh and bone of a text. It is, by far, one of humankind's most important inventions (after agriculture), given the impact it procured in society, the human brain, and the construction of reality (Meggs). The alphabet, once organized and deployed in any medium, became written text and a natural way to express thoughts and emotions. However, the inherent power of this invention demanded an opposite to balance its inception in reality. Society's construction of text implied—by Hegelian dialectic of opposition—the destruction of some other element.

On the necessity of a destructive force to counterbalance the productive force, McLuhan (1964) writes that "[t]he major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur" (p. 8). McLuhan is suggesting that the transition from sound, representing abstract thinking through language, to graphics, representing sound visually, became a representation of a representation, and therefore, the replacement

of reality by simulation (Baurdillard, 1981). This reinterpreted reality, attained through the naturalization of text as a form of language-thought, forced us to redefine how we encode and decode reality in relation to time and space. Textuality, or the interwoven fabric created among texts placed on the same medium, became a powerful way to preserve knowledge, define power, and construct meaning. Text became our number one mode for interpreting reality, intertextuality became a form of interaction among texts, using the power of abstract thinking as its medium.

McLuhan (1964) posits that we drastically switched modes of interpretation—and information reception—when we fully developed and embraced written communication. He claims that we exchanged "an ear for an eye by means of the technology of writing" (p. 139). The alphabet in particular allowed us to break free from the constraints of real time, and the reasoning of the tribal world. He describes the importance of glyphs, or inscribed symbols, to represent not only the sounds they stood for, but more importantly, the multiple concepts embedded in these objects through their graphic tracings. As humanity moved forward, and history became obsessively attached to the people in power, the alphabet evolved to become a written language and the perfect prison of knowledge. Socrates expresses such a concern early in philosophy, when he questions writing as the best way to represent knowledge.

Prior to the invention of the printing press in the 15$^{th}$ century, only the highest authorities were allowed access to and control of the alphabet. The written word became so important and fundamental to the construction of society and the distribution of power that it was equated to the concept of God itself. This idea that text is God remains, even today,

as it is expressed in powerful publications such as the James King Bible. Tyndale's (1611) work demonstrates the power of the written word as it relates to the ultimate controlling entity. One may still note the power of these words 400 hundred years later, when the commanding phrase attributed to the apostle John is repeated ad infinitum: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1 King James Version).

It could be argued that there is nothing more powerful than textuality today, at least for Western reality. The perfect unison among the constituents of the alphabet makes the harnessing of power possible. The written text became so prevalent that it detached us from reality. This idea is reinforced by McLuhan (1964) when he explains that the alphabet "was a technical means of severing the spoken word from its aspects of sound and gesture" (p. 193). However, this keen observation could also be interpreted positively. The severing of the seemingly unified construct between sound and idea created the ideal conditions to expand our understanding of the world. The alphabet became the perfect system of signs to use language to express freely, and to expand with no apparent boundaries. Text was born, and along with it, semiology.

According to de Saussure (1916/1983), semiology is the science of sign systems that studies societies in relation to the symbols they create. De Saussure places a great degree of importance in words as a means to create meaning. He argues that language:

> [D]oes not have a direct relationship to reality but functions as a system of differences: words (signifiers) have no inherent relation to the concrete things that

> they describe (signifieds), but generate meaning as a result of their differential relationship with other signifiers. (p. 16)

As explained by Moran (2010), the arbitrariness between elements constructing the language is important because it presents a twofold potential. First, the same notion of meaning-making applicable to written languages can be extrapolated to other systems of signs. Second, it opens the possibility for communication between many different systems of signs to foster a text-to-text multidimensional dialogue, defined as "intertextuality."

Moreover, Moran (2010) emphasizes the role of construction (and hence structuralism) in this process when he describes intertextuality as "the notion that texts are formulated not through acts of originality by individual authors but through interaction and dialogue with other texts" (p. 84). He believes that this particular feature of textual construction, embedded with the potential to promote inter-dialogue with any other textual construction and/or system of signs, is one of the most significant reasons why contemporary education promotes interdisciplinary knowledge construction. For Moran, the notion of what constitutes "text" can be expanded to accommodate other forms of nonlinguistic symbolic representation, such as "cinema, photography, music and fashion...emphasizing the form that they share with other texts rather than their specific content" (p. 85).

These other forms of symbolic representation, he continues to explain, are summarized in Barthes's (1957) *Mythologies*. Barthes's text aids in the discussion of intertextuality and interdisciplinary studies. In his text, Barthes places several cultural commodities, such as wrestling matches, soap powders, children's toys, wine, and French

cars, on a single conceptual horizontal line. By analyzing these constructs under the same lens, Barthes demonstrates the capacity of different systems of signs to interact with one another.

In "From Work to Text" (1978), Barthes describes the ability of texts to interconnect with other texts as a form of expression that could render new multidimensional readings called "intertextuality." This interchange of information presents text not only as the perfect medium to fuse thoughts, plans, and ideas, but also for bringing together authors with authors to foster a form of dialogue that thrusts the idea of interdisciplinary knowledge forward. The idea of symbolically and intellectually merging texts to create meaning—in the act known as "intertextuality"—is the most fitting medium to promote the "interbreeding" of disciplines. Barthes expresses this principle of interdisciplinarity and intertextuality in the following manner:

> It is indeed as though the interdisciplinarity which is today held up as a prime value in research cannot be accomplished by the simple confrontation of specialist branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinary is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down – perhaps even violently, via the jolts of fashion – in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of sciences that were to be brought peacefully together, this unease in the classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation. (p. 155)

Barthes's discussion of interdisciplinary communication corresponds to what I define as hypertext. The concept of hypertext, according to Landow (1997) is best expressed as "blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open ended, perpetually unfinished textuality" (p. 2). Landow establishes a connection to semiology when he describes hypertext as a "galaxy of signifiers" (p. 32) that makes up a living network of information. His reflections are an interpretation of Barthes's (1977) words, which read:

> In the ideal text the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning, it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable. (p. 5)

Interestingly enough, Landow does not limit his theorizing to texts as words expressed through alphabetic glyphs, but as units of meaning, or what Barthes identifies as "lexia."

> In his 1970 publication *S/Z*, Barthes describes the concept of lexia as
>
> brief, contiguous fragments… they are units of reading. This cutting up will be arbitrary in the extreme . . . . The lexia will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings. (p. 13)

For Landow (1997 not in your bibliography), lexia permits the further development of a new and transformed version of text composed of many lexias that are "multilinear" and "multisequential"(p. 3). At the same time, he continues to stress the flexibility of the

medium through interchangeable denominations between hypertext and hypermedia. Postmodern hypertextual literary works, such as Jackson's (1995) *Patchwork Girl* and Coover's (1997) *Briar Rose*, are often analyzed to better illustrate the current application and potential expansion of this new medium. Both of these literary works are constructed with lexias that are electronically interconnected. Analyzing these electronic texts helped me to understand, in a more comprehensive way, the concept of lexia.

New electronic media are capable enough and flexible enough to accommodate the demands imposed by a seemingly chaotic intertextual exchange of lexia. The required medium is expansive, inclusive, and can accommodate immense quantities of data, and does not, necessarily, impose its specificity using the particular demands of a single discipline. Even though severing intrinsic meaning from a medium is almost certainly a utopian thought, the ideal medium for interdisciplinary action should allow the possibility to function as a placeholder of meaning, as a *tabula rasa*. The placeholder that promotes intertextual dialogue and the exchange of thoughts is conceptually embodied in cyberspace (Turkle, 1999).

One could argue that cyberspace departs from the constraints of the physical world and expands its breadth to include other forms of intertextual expression. These intertextual forms of expression are welcomed by hypermedia technology, and thrive in such technology due to hypertextuality. Literature, to name one technology, has fully embraced the notion of new media as *tabula rasa*, as a means of expression, as is evinced in electronic journals, ebooks, and hypertextual narratives. By the end of the 1990s, when the notion of new media began to solidify, an unexpected conflict occurred: artists who had

been using new media for two decades thought they were entitled to claim it as a discipline of their own. Manovich (2002) explains that many artists began to use computers, regardless of their preferred media, "to create, modify, and produce works." "[D]o we need to have a special field of new media art?" he asks (p. 14). However, this conflict is not limited to the endless forms of cultural production derived from these emerging hypertext-based technologies. Rather, and more importantly, it expands to the people using them and the apparent lack of a discipline, which is presumably required to construct seemingly effective pieces of intertextual communication.

To conclude, contrary to the attitude that the young Victor Frankenstein adopts toward his creation, the interdisciplinary monster that we are creating using hypertext and inter-dialogue via new media machines is impossible not to acknowledge, analyze, and embrace. The monster's trillions of invisible arms, heads, mouths, ears, and eyes are reaching everyone in the galaxy, for each monster is ignited by our own need to communicate. The new galaxy we are creating, which is based on millions of lexia, will soon surpass the galaxy that we know today, at least at the conceptual level. It is necessary now to face this monster instead of running away from our lab. In confronting the monster we are confronting ourselves, not only as individuals, but as a society. The proportions that this faceless creature is gaining demand our attention and further exploration. Education today can no longer limit itself to printed books and flat, unidimensional chalkboards. On the contrary, education must embrace interdisciplinarity to take advantage of this unlimited electronic fiend, which is inexorably turning into our own reflection. We must face the monster, I insist, since the monster is slowly but surely becoming part of our bodies, living

in our consciousness, and helping us construct ourselves. Hypertext and interdisciplinarity work side by side, feeding each other, honoring their progenitors by constantly referring to them to invoke history and signification. These emerging realities are calling for immediate reflection about our role in the development of this invisible and omniscient creature that continues to devour alphabet soups of hypertexts, as continues to grow and gain a life of its own. Back in our Frankenstein-like micro labs, contained in the flickering flat face of new media machines, hour by hour, many inventions arise in this shadowless reality we call hypermedia. To embrace interdisciplinarity in education is no longer an option, but a given. To not embrace interdisciplinarity would be incompatible with the times. Is it going to be easy? Not at all. Interdisciplinarity requires, after all, the command of at least two disciplines, and this subtle yet fundamental prerequisite implies hard work and struggle. Interdisciplinarity is a new flexible realm where scholarly research can thrive and expand to horizons that are no longer flat and unidimensional. What is even more important is that interdisciplinarity fosters and nurtures the monster we all are helping to raise. What is more, this monster demands attention. It demands constant attention in order to know anything and everything, all the time, from what is on our mind, which takes the shape of a Facebook status box, to what we are doing every second, as represented by the tiny lexia that we "tweeted" to a restless world. However, we are still nowhere near the realization Victor Frankenstein experienced upon creating his monster. We did not run away when we saw our creature. Quite the opposite, we embraced it, and came to believe that the monster is the creation of our own intellect. But, who is really in control? Who is creating the monster? Whose monster is it anyway?

## Hypertext: the Blood of ICEVORGS

Having argued that the human sensorium mediates between one's body and the experience of the physical world engulfing body and mind, I can comfortably argue in favor of Baudrillard's (1981) order of the Hyperreal as working in unison with us to construct the performative narrative we term "reality." The Real, as a stage, is composed of time and space, as well as of the different media that make up the dialogue that takes place among chemical reactions, abstract thinking, and the physical world—all of which we collectively refer to as "intertext." Acknowledging this mind-body-reality intertextual dialogue is a complex endeavor, one that continues to be an arduous task for philosophic inquiry.

The connections—and disconnections—between mind, body, and space have been problematized from generation to generation, from culture to culture, and from technology to technology. Body, mind, and reality are, after all, only three of the many faces forming the polyhedric intertext that binds individual to individual in order to ultimately construct society. However, to function properly, societies need to recognize the individuality of every one of its constituents; they must do this in order to maintain an acceptable level of control to enable the proliferation of intertextual dialogue.

Inspired by the possibilities for identity representation offered by contemporary technology, the agents in power maintain control by constructing portable objects designed to represent the individual. These objects contain synthesized information resulting from the combination of images and words, and bind the individual to what could be defined as

a shared reality. However, given the arbitrary nature of the intertextual languages used to construct them, and the reality in which they are implemented, their validity is interpretive and open to transformation.

A dramatic way to experience the arbitrariness contained in these portable contrivances, and the actual disengagement from the body-mind relationship they claim to represent, takes place during overseas traveling. Upon arrival to any international port of entry, one may observe well-guarded gates and innumerable checkpoints ready to propel one's mind into a liminal state where identity stands still, as uncertain and doubtful as could be. Is the person described in the passport oneself? Is the photograph contained in such a device a trustworthy likeness? The repetitive and scrutinizing gaze of the uniformed officer's eyes—the officer who is trained to doubt—reveals the fragility of these intertextual objects as a mechanism for confirming identity.

To complicate matters, these portable gimmicks are already incapable of securing the much-needed singularity required to construct identity. The uncontrollable power of contemporary technology to generate an infinite number of originals demonstrates the limitations and strengths of these modes of representation. When the discourse of identity construction moves from intertext to hypertext, the process of identity construction must be revamped, as *reality* is no longer constrained by time and space.

Today, the individuals' options for identity construction are neither limited to a single mode of representation, nor are they constrained by the flat, static surface of a portable document. The purpose of this argument is to entice readers to consider hypermedia machines as natural extensions of one's body. Hypermedia are alternative

ways to construct identity, which use hypertext as the vital, organic fluid in the development of electronic dimensions aimed to push our sense of reality into simulation. To further my analyses of the role of hypermedia in identity construction, I will relate the current discourse to Baudrillard's (1981) thoughts on simulacra and Haraway's (1983) thoughts on simulation.

What is a body after all but the sum of its parts? The naked body cannot exist in society merely as such, but through the never-ending mediation of objects. The garments protecting the body, for instance, become part of the identity of the user, as does the jewelry one wears on his or her body. This idea expands ad infinitum to cars, houses, pens, works of art, home appliances, and so forth; all become part of the intricate construction of individual and societal identity. The objects we choose to own are extensions of our bodies; we regard them representations of our identity. Consider, for instance, people who own Harley Davidson motorcycles. The way they express their identities is taken to the extreme. The bike is not an augmentation of the body; it is the body. Even more importantly, portable hypermedia devices have been naturalized as part of the body. In contemporary society, refusing to own a cellular phone has become a fashion statement. It stands as a strong and loud message to the world regarding one's political and social stance on such technology. It is equivalent to claiming one's allegiance to vegetarianism or feminism. Ownership of a mass-produced hypermedia contrivance determines the social class to which the owner belongs. Even more relevant is the fact that most of us carry these electronic orthotics attached to our bodies, so we can protect them and be protected by them. Cell phones help us construct identity at both an individual and collective level,

while allowing us (thanks to hypertext) to maintain a sense of life as we move through them. This observation is, by no means, a new concern. It has been the subject of critical analysis since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. It has also been a source of inspiration in literature for authors concerned by this overpowering human-machine relationship.

In 1839, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* published the short story "The Man that Was Used Up: A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign." The story's author, Edgar Allan Poe, created a fictional character, General John A.B.C. Smith, who metaphorically represents a socially successful person. He was a body, textually fabricated by Poe, as a cutting-edge human-machine who was publicly admired and highly respected. When presented as a single visually perceivable and cohesive whole, A.B.C. Smith is commanding and overpowering. According to Poe's characterization, he is also physically attractive. When General A.B.C. Smith speaks, he does so with a commanding voice. Smith's statements about the privilege of living in the age of mechanical invention are expressed in a reassuring tone:

> We are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age... ...And who shall calculate the immense influence upon social life — upon arts — upon commerce — upon literature — which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electro magnetics! (p. 257)

However, as the narrating voice continues with the deconstruction of this seemingly perfect social character, the end result falls far from the idea of "human," at least from the perspective of "human" as a single physical entity. When Smith was taken apart piece by

piece, the remaining "thing" is described as a living form, a mass closer to what could be defined as a consciousness container. Smith is an amorphous body, a living something with no identity but that which was made out of augmented parts and pieces. Poe's concerns regarding the machine, and its effects upon society, continue to be relevant a century and a half later. His vision and genius allowed him to construct Smith's character out of mechanical pieces, using electric energy as the "glue" holding everything together, alive and unified. Poe's metaphorical glue, one could argue, is comparable to hypertext today. This ethereal substance, hypertext, can only be activated by electric impulses, and can only be experienced through the mediation of hypermedia machines. In return, these electronic devices can be considered as extensions of our bodies. In new media, identity is created in a similar fashion. It uses pieces and parts of information to construct the individual as a whole.

It is interesting to observe that Poe's story also suggests that we currently live the same predicament that General A.B.C. Smith faced: the need for hypermedia machines to assist human beings in the construction of identity. The body cannot live in a natural state anymore, only as a construct made out of symbolic objects orchestrated in a simulated reality.

Electronic machines and humans are in constant interaction, as they do not work in isolation from each other; on the contrary, they are quite interdependent. According to Licklider (1960), the human-machine interaction is characterized by a symbiosis. He defines "symbiosis" as ...[a] cooperative living together in intimate association, or even close union, of two dissimilar organisms" (p. 74). What separates humans and electronic

machines is nothing but physical distance. In the world of medicine, for instance, there are several cases where the electronic machine has already entered the body. Pacemakers are widely accepted devices that must develop an extremely intimate association with the host organism. Similar cases abound throughout the world; the bodily incorporation of machines is particularly easy to observe when it assists the sensorium in the interpretation of reality. Such assistance as provided by machines includes hearing devices, tanks of oxygen, vision-correcting eyewear, blood-pressure monitors, automated glucose-releasing mechanisms, among many others. These objects are not only demonstrating the integral role they play in the preservation of the humans who use them, but they also open up a larger and more complex inquiry about identity, and the interpretation of the body. If the body cannot stand on its own anymore, it could be argued, that it is just one more text in the intertextual discourse of its own construction. Body is then bodytext, an intellectual construct based on symbiotic relationships with the other objects that construct the whole.

In 1960, Licklider addressed this symbiotic relationship between human and electronic devices as his visionary prophecies of what is to come. He describes "chemical machines" outperforming the human brain in "most of the functions considered exclusive [to it]" (p. 5). He also suggests that the main problem of this potential scenario is based on the discrepancies between the language of the computer and the language of the human. He refers to these discrepancies as obstacles to true symbiosis. Licklider observes the most complex issue to overcome is how to allow a true symbiotic relationship between humans and machines to occur, in order to develop a common language and thus foster interaction. He advances his argument by saying:

> For the purposes of real-time cooperation between men and computers, it will be necessary, however, to accept an additional and rather different principle of communication and control. (p. 79)

The common language Licklider (1960) describes could be interpreted as the "flow of life" that allows the symbiotic interaction to succeed. This electronic symbolic blood helping the symbiosis to occur could be directly applied to the concept of hypertext. Hypertext is, then, the common language flowing from one hypermedia device to another. Hypertext is the vital fluid of the system, the binding agent, the element holding it together.

When hypertext is considered the common language described by Licklider, an intimate association between objects and humans emerges, and it allows life to flow, and symbiosis to engender interaction. The interaction promotes the redefinition of self and the reconsideration of identity construction. This emerging human-hypermedia relationship thrives in the textual gardens of information, with hypertext playing the role of nourishing mediating substance.

New hybrid organisms exist in the pragmatics of this evolving human-hypermedia machine relationship. Hypermedia machines are now attached to the body. They share common ground through sight, hearing, and touch; smell and taste are still temporarily frozen in the liminal world of R&D departments. Images working in unison with sound are perceived through sight, and then they are manipulated through touch.

Touch becomes the new commodity to sell; it is now part of hypermedia machines at all price levels. Hypertext uses these three senses as forms of interaction. It preserves the fictive life as a continuous flow of invisible energy by using electronic waves and

microwaves. Furthermore, hypertext is meaningful only when it exists in the public arena. The definition of what constitutes "public" transforms to accommodate portable hypermedia devices. According to Haraway (1983), cyborgs, such as these hypermedia devices, are "[n]o longer structured by the polarity of public and private" (p. 517).

Bodies and hypermedia machines have co-founded a new space in compliance with culture and the marketplace. Culture, Haraway (1983) suggests, "can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other" (p. 517).

Contemporary cyborgs demand common ground with each other, and they find it in the realm of social networking. Social networks are electronic simulations of reality, and they are constructed intertextually using an infinite amount of hypertext. The individual does not matter anymore, Haraway (1983) dramatically claims, because he "would not be recognized in the Garden of Eden" (p. 517). There are problems, nonetheless, resulting from this new form of human-hypermedia machine interaction. Identities, she says, are fragmented and ultimately lost. We are caught up in the constant motion of the world of hypermedia. The concept of "I" has been replaced by an infinite number of I's existing as simulated multiplex environments. Good argument. In a multiplex environment, several identities may be tied to one identity constructing a single self. The constraints of the physical world are no longer applicable to electronic media. Our new identities, Haraway reveals, are in the process of redefinition from an "organic, industrial society to polymorphous, information system--from all work to all play, a deadly game" (p. 523).

At the same time that bodies are no longer constrained by the limitations of the physical world, the number of selves a person may possess in the simulated world are

likewise limitless. Haraway (1983) introduces a theoretical construct she calls “informatics of domination” (p. 523) to deliver a synthesized, comprehensive theory of reality, which moves away from cyberspace, in order to propose simulation as the norm. Here, Haraway argues that representation is replaced by simulation, reproduction by replication, and the public/private dichotomy by a standardized, flattened, simulated citizenship.

Self then, following Haraway’s (1983) line of thought, must negotiate presence and identity in this new polymorphic public environment. The individual expresses him or herself by using hypertext as a metalanguage. This dramatic shift in perception completely dismantles the boundaries established thousands of years ago. The sense of reality, kept alive by the preservation of written languages, fades away to make room for new interpretations.

To complicate matters, this simulated reality presents, according Baudrillard (1981), “the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real” and “the impossibility of staging illusion” (p. 19). For Baudrillard, illusion and reality are chimeras replaced by simulation. This electronically constructed reality represents a multidimensional map of nothingness, a desert, a simulation. He describes it in these terms:

> [I]t is the map that precedes the territory -- precession of simulacra -- it is the map that engenders the territory... ...It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real ‘itself.’ (p. 166)

Both Haraway (1983) and Baudrillard (1981) are describing hypertextuality, an electronic conceptual garden that took several decades to evolve. This simulated environment

challenges notions of reality, which are better experienced as “social networks.”

Barely two decades have passed since Sir Timothy John Berners-Lee came up with the idea to use the World Wide Web as a way to exchange information from individual to individual, and from individuals to groups of individuals, and thus break free from the traditional method of person-to-person communication (Manovich, 1995). The World Wide Web hosts social networks, which account for the simulation that Haraway (1983) and Baudrillard (1981 not in your bibliography) theorize. The current proliferation of social networks in cyberspace is the result of the overwhelming demand for human interconnectivity, and the commercialization of affordable hypermedia machines.

In an attempt to define cyber social networks, one could argue that social networks are simulated reality environments shared by the simultaneous “presence” of more than two people in the same electronic space. Cyber social networks exist (for the time being) only in hypermedia machines: cellular phones, PDAs, desktop computers, portable computers, notebooks, netbooks, laptops, game consoles, telephones, and cars. In practical terms, a cyber-social network is usually composed of several million people who are “present” in the same consensual cyberspace, which effectively dismantles preconceptions of time and space as constructed by their sensoria to describe the real physical world. One could argue that cyber social networks constitute the collective consciousness of humanity, or what Gibson (1984) describes as “consensual hallucination” (p. 5). Furthermore, the intertextual constructions taking place in hypermedia are redefining individual identity, in addition to collective and cultural ones.

Using rhythm and hypertext to construct its plot, one literary work in particular

prophetically recounts a radical futuristic social network. *Blood Music* describes a new form of computational machine that does not only become invisible due to the progress of nanotechnology, but is also capable of achieving real intelligence and individuality (Bear, 1985). The story's protagonist, a misunderstood character, Virgil Ulam, is a scientist who creates what could be described as nano-Frankensteins. These cell-sized invisible "machines" are programmed with two very simple and very direct commands: improve and multiply. He names his creatures "noocytes," and embraces them with tender love as parts of his self. When he finds out about the cancellation of his research due to the harmful nature of his creations, he injects the noocytes into his own blood stream. These invisible yet omnipresent computer-cells become part of him. They invade his body with the predetermined and programmed mission of improvement and multiplication. To construct the coda, Bear describes how the noocytes identify Ulam's consciousness as a physical entity subject to control. The noocytes then proceed to take over, turning him into a "galaxy."

At this point, I cannot help but wonder if Bear (1985) purposefully designed the name of Ulam's creation, "noocytes," to sound like "new sites." Interestingly enough, this fictional narrative runs parallel to the current cyber social network businesses available online. Ulam's command of "improve and multiply" could be adapted as "interconnect and expand" to fit cyber social networks. In both cases, the concept of speed is vital for the preservation of this simulation. According McLuhan (1964), speed facilitates the quantum leap towards accepting simulation as a meaningful constituent of one's life. As McLuhan writes, "All meaning alters with acceleration, because all patterns of personal and political

interdependence change with any acceleration of information" (p. 199). Speed urges growth, organization, and multiplication. In cyber social networks, speed is a vital component of the discourse since it becomes the medium by which hypertext moves. Speed in information exchange provides cyborg citizens with a meaningful placeholder for their new identities. The placeholder remains "there," in cyberspace, for as long as needed or wanted.

To better illustrate the previous theoretical observations, I have selected the most relevant social network today (determined by number of active users) as a case study: Facebook. Facebook is a cyber social network, which nests more than two hundred million "inhabitants." Facebook exists as a true simulated megalopolis in full defiance of Picasso's famous quote "Everything you can imagine is real." Facebook is not a science fiction novel, but is rather a vast container of bodiless people constructed by thoughts, reflections, and identities. All elements forming this simulation are expressed through hypertext. Identities are put together using a hybrid composite of multimedia. The multimedia include photographic portraits, virtual pets, playful simulated performances, and what claim to be objective data such as CVs, marital statuses, religions, political parties, hometowns, and other pieces of information subject to play and fictive construction. They share the same space with what could be described as irrelevant, irreverent, and nonsensical information. Statistical polls about sexual orientation, ways to cheat, places to visit, and shows to attend are intermingled with thoughts, ideas, ideologies, conceptions, intimacies, complaints, invitations, suggestions, colors, shapes, beliefs, tastes, and flavors to share—all of which are spread out in the same space constructing the simulation.

Facebook presents an overwhelming collection of images that desperately seek to become, to exist, and to be relevant. Every Facebook identity is constructed as a personal page. The page includes a photographic portrait open to the public at any time, yet it is disguised, nonetheless, as private. Inside each "profile," a virtual persona demands attention. According to Mitchell (2005), images need a medium, "a place to be seen"; they demand "to be looked at, to be admired, to be loved, to be shown" (p. 73). The construction of identity in this simulated kingdom is closer to the construction of character in fictional narratives.

What is more important to point out is that cyber social networks, such as Facebook, are not constrained by time and space. Both time and space are, indeed, irrelevant for the continuation of Facebook's vital functions and sustainability. One could argue that Facebook is the new hypertextual portable identification card. However, as mentioned before, it is only one of them. Other simulated environments (such as Linkedin, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, and Photobucket) serve the same purpose of acknowledging physical presence in space and time, based on certain constructs, such as here, there, and everywhere. The notion of reality is completely dismantled, and immediately assigned to the realm of simulation, mediated by hypermedia machines and glued together by hypertext. The proposition to consider hypertext as the metaphoric blood, or conceptual living substance in constant flow through the entire system is possible to experience through the Facebook interface. Good analysis.

To conclude this brief analysis of simulated environments, one distinctive piece of information stands out to demonstrate the power of hypertext as a source of living energy

and a symbiotic construct between humans and hypermedia machines. It is the possibility of sharing thoughts on the top portion of the Facebook screen. There, a box is provided to answer a simple question: "What's on your mind?" Every time a new phrase is entered in the box, sharing the mental or physical status of any given user, it immediately becomes readily available to all the users listed as one's friends. The replies swiftly return from friends to acknowledge the injection of "life" into the collective discourse of the simulated environment. The organism is alive, and it has the potential to simulate reality for its users. A symbiosis is evident, and it is impossible to stop.

The liquid and organic nature of cyber social networks is now the subject of scholarly analysis (including this paper) as means to provide a better understanding of hypermedia and their effect on society. However, this brief analysis produces more questions than answers. A few questions stand out among others: Are these electronic organisms becoming part of our lives, or are we becoming part of theirs? Who is controlling whom? Good questions. What is evident is that the construction of identity is not limited to a passport, an ID card, or a driver's license anymore, nor are time and space determining constituents of the reality where identities are implemented. Hypertext is, indeed, the medium holding all this simulation together, and hypermedia machines are slowly but surely becoming integral parts of our bodies and our bodies themselves. In return, our bodies are expanding their conceptual presence to become galaxies, units of text, bodytexts that stimulate the expansion of an electronic garden of hypertext—a garden nourishing a multiplex of identities, in a multiplex of realities, intertwined with a multiplex of simulations. Virtual multiplicity turns out to be a valid way to break free from the

constraints of body, time, and space.

As argued, ICEVORGS inhabit conceptual spaces, even though they can be observed to embody real spaces, as well as virtual ones. Like electronic chameleons, ICEVORGS adapt their fluid and mestizo nature to the circumstances, but unlike those beautiful animals, ICEVORGS do not seek to camouflage, but stand out. By getting the observer's attention, they breed, spawn, are born, and thrive. However, to observe and identify them, they must be caught as they move from one realm, or conceptual plane, to another. When they cut through realities, they leave open doors to observe what is left of what once was the Real, the dimension that took place before Baudrillard's (1981) simulacra. To observe and analyze ICEVORGS in their natural environment, I must introduce the only tool capable of such endeavors, a figure of speech better known as "metalepsis."

## Metalepsis or the Strange Loop

According to Bell (2013), a metalepsis, as initially defined by Genette (1980) in his seminal work *Narrative Discourse*, 'is any intrusion by the extra diegetic narrator or narrate into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse' (pp. 234-235). Metalepsis is thus a term that describes the movement of fictional entities between diegetic levels, either from the narrating space into the narrated space, or from the narrated space into the narrating space. Providing a useful means of conceptualizing the two types of metalepsis that Genette identifies, Pier (2005), following Nelles (1997), has divided the term into two types: 'descending' and 'ascending,' respectively. (p. 22)

Given the complexity of the subject matter, and my lack of experience, let alone expertise, in narratology, I find myself nonetheless obliged to introduce this concept, integral to ICEVORG, using a long and complex quote. That is one of the downfalls of the much-sought-after Holy Grail of education. I am talking about interdisciplinarity, and the complexities associated with its pedagogical intent. Considering that my area of expertise is in design and visual communication, I find myself in constant intellectual negotiation about the extent to which I should enter disciplines that are not my own. That being said, I think that in the case of metalepsis, the fact that I am venturing into the realm of narratology is indeed a metalepsis in its own right, in that I narrate, and am narrator and story as well. The first time I heard about this literary concept I fell in love with it. I cannot precisely articulate why; it was probably honest and disinterested chemistry, love at first sight, mutual curiosity. I cannot tell.

What I could tell is that from the first time I read about metalepsis, I could not keep it from getting under my skin. I appreciate the fact that it exists to transgress boundaries. The way I see it, and how I relate to it, is as a powerful tool to promote, nurture, and even challenge, creativity and creative production. After teaching how to think differently for almost two decades now, I have found my Narcissus pond in metalepsis. Once I developed a better understanding of its operation, I began to use it in my own work and pedagogical approach to design and art education. Metalepsis is, from my very personal point of view, a form of resistance, a way to break free from boredom and predictability, and, ultimately, an effective way to enter into what Baudrillard (1981) claims does not exist anymore: reality.

In their article entitled "Ontological Metalpsis and Unnatural Narratology," Bell and Alber (2012) further elaborate on Genette's (1980) concept of narrative transgression by describing how Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) proposes two forms of metalepsis. One is ontological, which opens a passage between levels that result in their interpenetration, or "mutual contamination," while the other, rhetorical metalepsis, only "opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of the boundaries" (Bell & Alber, 2012, p. 207). Then, Bell and Alber proceed to reference Fludernik (2003), who distinguishes not two but four levels of metalepsis: 1) authorial metalepsis, which serves to foreground the inventedness of the story; 2) ontological metalepsis, in which the narrator (or character) jumps to a lower diegetic level; 3) ontological metalepsis, in which a fictional character jumps to a higher narrative level; and 4) rhetorical metalepsis. Bell and Alber indicate that Fludernik also "discriminates between 'real' and metaphorical metalepsis," or in other words, "between actual crossing of ontological boundaries and a merely imaginative transcendence of narrative level" (p. 167).

In response to Fludernik's classifications, Bell and Alber (2012) propose yet another way of dividing the stem. They claim that authorial and rhetorical metalepsis are "merely metaphoric ones in which no actual boundary crossing takes place" (p. 168). In attempting to reconstitute the complexity behind these concepts, I will translate the preceding into layman's terms. Metalepsis happens when a person realizes that the narrative that he or she was experiencing at a phenomenological level—its intentionality—was not real. Basically metalepsis consists of a paradoxical leap from one level to another. All of a sudden, what

was taken for granted is no longer certain. As you may have already observed, I am not as much interested in narratology as I am in the application of metalepsis to disciplines that claim a new form of reality construction. More specifically, I am talking about reality construction in virtual spaces, the Internet, cyberspace, and the concepts I have discussed thus far.

When the concept of metalepsis is applied to the fields of fine arts and design, such a powerful, creative tool becomes radically important in proposing creative ways of problem solving, for it is a phenomenon observable in everyday life, as I will show in the case studies that follow. It is of particular interest to my dissertation project that you understand that ICEVORGs require a conceptual metaleptic machine (Ryan, 2005) to populate. In the preceding chapters, I discussed the conceptual framework that permits me to propose the notion of ICEVORG as an evolved form of representation capable of moving through realities. It is precisely through the use of metalepsis that ICEVORGs navigate. In other words, metalepsis is the conceptual aircraft preferred by ICEVORGs as means of transportation among fields of different realities.

As far as Bell and Alber (2012) are concerned, another distinction must be made when metalepsis is utilized in trans-medial environments. In other words, when the transgression of narratives moves from one medium to another, a distinction between "worlds" and "levels" must be addressed; they write that these interactions take place "between ontologically distinct worlds rather than narrative levels" (p. 169). Bell and Alber's observation that metalepsis is more about moving between worlds than narrative levels allows me to move beyond narratology, since I am more interested in the

complexities of trans-medial storytelling than those particulars of literature. Nevertheless, I find this linguistic tool pertinent to my proposed theoretical creature, the ICEVORG. To stress even more how my views on metalepsis differ from narratology, I must add that it is not interesting to me how a character moves between narrative levels, but how we, humans, theoretical cyborgs with augmented electronic limbs, create avatars that will soon enough become ICEVORGs that gain a life of their own. It is then, just then, that we move from ontological planes via metalepsis.

Ennslin (2012) elaborates on how metalepsis is used to conduct what she calls "transmedia journ[ies]" (p. 1) to move among different worlds, including short fiction, comics, comedy film, participatory media, digital fiction, computer games, and virtual worlds. Ennslin describes the experience lived during a visit to an art exhibition that assisted her in the development of this theoretical observation:

> A few months ago I visited the Magritte (1898-1967) exhibition at the Tate Liverpool, titled 'The Pleasure Principle', and I saw a range of pictures that made me think about reality and representation as different ontological spheres, and how the two can be made to overlap and converge. And then, during my literature search, I came across a painting by the same artist titled –Le maître du plaisir— (The Master of Revels, oil on canvas), from early 1926, which is particularly relevant to metalepsis across media. (Figure 20) The painting depicts a mise-en-abyme: a picture within a picture—which isn't the same as metalepsis but a very closely related concept. What is metaleptic about this picture is the fact that the two worlds portrayed in it are interlinked, thus blurring the seemingly impermeable

boundary between them. The fictional world of the embedded picture is connected, quite literally, to the fictional world of the painting with a piece of black string. The Master dances along the tightrope between the painting's reality and 'his' outside world. (p. 2)

Figure 20: Le Maitre du Plaisir, 1926 (oil on canvas), Magritte, Rene (1898-1967) / Private Collection / Bridgeman Images

Ennslin's (2012) experiences are a good example of the theoretical path I am pursing with the concept of metalepsis, as applied to the notion of ICEVORG. My goal is to find the concept of metalepsis applied outside of literature and narratology by expanding the idea that this form of transgression is not particular to the world of narratology, but to life itself.

Ontological transgression is possible thanks to the rupture of realities and perceptual planes brought on—and expedited—by today's electronic communication technologies.

Ennslin (2012) continues her analysis by focusing on how storytelling has an inherent ability to [create] the illusion of another world, or fictional universe. Fludemik (2009) explains: 'narrative texts create the illusion that the fictional world is directly accessible while a text is being read, that it really does exist, and in the precise form in which it is described. (p. 3)

Wolf (1993) explains how narratologists refer to this idea of aesthetic illusion as "mimesis," not in the sense of an authentic reconstruction of the real world, but rather "an illusion of experiencing reality" (p. 31 as cited in Ennslin, 2011, p. 89).

I will take a step further and argue that given the electronic contraptions that we have designed and made part of our own Self, namely cell phones, computers, tablets, and other more conceptual creatures, such as the Internet and cyberspace, the illusion of experiencing reality is no longer necessary since it is not possible to access a single experience of reality anymore (Baudrillard, 1981).

Drawing upon Baudrillard's (1981) reflections on simulacra and the order of the Hyperreal, I argue that we live in a hybridity of worlds that intertwine fiction and reality, and to inhabit these hybrid worlds we need to go above and beyond our physical limitations. To achieve what seemed to be impossible, we make use of ICEVORGS to transcend ourselves, and by way of said representations, we move through ontological worlds as a result of metalepsis. On the other hand, to avoid stepping inside the lines of a field foreign to me (here, I am referring to literature), I will refer to the implementation of

the principles of metalepsis as the "strange loop." I do this following the work of McHale (1987), who refers to metalepsis as a "strange loop," or a "short circuit" (p. 213), in the structure of a narrative. The strange loop is in accordance with Barthes's (1981) notion of punctum in that it is a prick, a rupture, and ultimately, a component particularly important for the construction of an ICEVORG.

At a more personal level, I must add that I have seen myself involved in the strange loop I describe inasmuch as I see myself as a fictional character traveling through realities. I may refer to these realities as cultural ontologies, or worlds that keep tremendous similitude between them. They are worlds that are not only divided by 5000 kilometers of physical matter, but more importantly, by light years of cultural differences ranging from food to language, from beliefs to geography. Switching back and forth in terms of language, for instance, entails a narrative rupture. To think in English is different than to think in Spanish in the same way that writing in English differs significantly from writing in Spanish. In addition, the fact that I have two different accents that, in reality, are three is also another form of metalepsis. When I speak in Spanish, I do it with a very peculiar accent from the high Andes. My "cuencano" accent is an integral part of my identity, and serves me well in defining who I am and where I come from within the boundaries of Ecuador. When I speak in English, I drop my original accent altogether, yet I still have an accent, nonetheless. The accent I have when I speak English in America places me within the category of "alien" within the world of the United States of America. These linguistic differences have allowed me to experience, at a phenomenological level, the emotions and sensations accompanying moving between ontological worlds and switching planes. I

strongly identity my life with metalepsis inasmuch as I am convinced, as I mentioned earlier in my texts, that we live in the midst of fiction. I see myself then as my own character in need of an avatar to be able to move from story to story. However, an avatar is not enough, for it does not offer me, us, the flexibility and adaptability to move from ontology to ontology in the telling of my life. Therefore, I must move beyond the concept of the avatar; hence for the last twenty years, I have been transforming and nourishing my ICEVORG, but more specifically, and with more intentionality, for the last five. I have done it to be able to "jump across" stories with full physical transgression (Kukkonen and Klimet, 2011). In order to move between stories, we all need, I argue, to birth our very own ICEVORGS.

**ICEVORG: The Seed of What Will Eventually Become Self**

After having walked through mountains of text, I must stop, seek respite, and then venture to synthesize all things thought and written in order to proceed with the conclusion of my proposed theoretical monster, which I hope will take life of its own in a future to come.

The ICEVORG is a creature, a monster, a fiend that will evolve on its own. It is a poem, a sentence with no words. The ICEVORG is a conceptual organism that is neither avatar nor cyborg, but could be both or part of either one. It is a visual representation of the Self, understanding Self here not in the limitation of any given person, but extending the concept so as to cover ideas, organizations, corporations, brands, even political or social ideologies.

The ICEVORG does not have one body, but as many as are needed to be transcended

by disappearance. It is an entry point into the backstage of the hyperreal. An ICEVORG could be two-dimensional, three-dimensional, or multidimensional to adapt and thrive in emerging electronic media.

The ICEVORG's ultimate goal is to conjure emotion in the observer, as well as in its creator. ICEVORGs are creatures born by the reflection of the Self as it is expressed on the media where they thrive.

An ICEVORG is capable of communicating the identity of its creator or creators in a self-referential mode, and by means of repetition, iteration and honest expansion, to as many people as they can reach. An ICEVORG is meant to spread and populate the different media as extensively, as rapidly, and as intensely as possible.

An ICEVORG inhabits the spaces in between realities and feeds off of hypertext; it can only be observed through scholarly inquiry in the empty spaces created by the intermingling of the intertext.

The last constituent of an ICEVORG is the dialectical pairing of presence and absence in various media, and the ICEVORG's capacity and/or potential to become an electronic virus, a phenomenon that takes place when a message becomes the medium of itself.

The electronic viral dissemination of an ICEVORG secures its perennial existence by breaking free from the traditional constraints of time and space that bind and limit avatars or cyborgs.

Once created and released, they gain life of their own and will never disappear, for they are pure electricity. They have no fear of death, for they cannot die since they never live.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## ICEVORGs under the Magnifying Glass

If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see? –*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1865)

The time has finally come to make myself clear. I must now find some ICEVORGS to pin down under the microscope for observation and analysis. Will there be at least one ICEVORG to help me demonstrate that I am not too far into the rabbit hole?

In an attempt to express what an ICEVORG is, I will say that the presence of said creature takes place when the observer realizes that given objects—virtual or real—become mechanisms to construct the world that one used to be accustomed to in a slightly different way. An ICEVORG is meant to ignite a need to expand one's mental frontier in a conscious way. In order for this expansion to occur, a concept that has been mentioned throughout the dissertation must be present. I am talking about intentionality. The presence of intentionality will turn the apprehension of an ICEVORG into a phenomenological experience, as the observer realizes that there are more planes, or worlds, beyond those he or she was previously able to digest through the mere use of the senses.

Per my definition of an ICEVORG, a punctum must be observable through analysis. The prick must be there in the perceived reality where an ICEVORG is discovered. Said puncture will then allow us to analyze the different worlds that

metalepsis permits the ICEVORG to transgress, as well as to reflect upon the ways in which the boundaries between worlds are ruptured. By gazing upon the ICEVORG, one is able to acknowledge the limitations we humans are subject to, limitations that will no longer exist once the doors among planes have opened as a result of the ICEVORG. ICEVORG-watching takes place where the creature jumps across the interstices created by its movement through different media to spawn the idea it carries within. Good description.

This last chapter will begin by presenting the case study of South American Olympian Oscar Pistorius, and how Pistorius's lack of biological legs, in conjunction with his message and life events, validates his case as an ICEVORG. Following Pistorius a case study will then move into more detail by presenting the work of contemporary French artist Orlan. This case study will discuss Orlan's transgressions of space, time, and body through her well-documented performative plastic surgeries, by which she became artist, artwork, and message.

## TWO CASES STUDIES

### ICEVORG A: Oscar Pistorius

According to Howe (2011), elite sporting has never been more challenging than it is today due to never-ending technological contributions to the field of professional sports. A constant flow of criticism and debate engulf modern professional sports—to the point of dismantling historical notions of what it means to be an elite athlete with the minute interpolation of high-tech incursion in the field. In his article entitled "Cyborg and Supercrip: The Paralympics Technology and the (Dis)empowerment of Disabled Athletes," Howe (2011) describes the case of South African runner Oscar Pistorius, who having been born with physical impediments that led to the amputation of both legs at an early age, went on to become a famous Olympian during the Athens 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Pistorius often runs using prosthetics devices, or "blades," which have led him to be dubbed "Blade Runner" (Hunt-Grubbe, 2007). For Howe, the use of such high-tech contraptions by Paralympic athletes "means that they can be conceptualized as the embodiment of Haraway's (1991) cyborg, which is a hybrid body resulting from the fusion of a live organism and man-made technology" (p. 858). Howe argues that in the context of the Paralympic sports, the most successful athletes may have been seen as "supercrips" (p. 858). I must add that the contradictory semantic nature of the term "supercrip" makes it engaging and interesting to follow, though not an ICEVORG just yet. The term "supercrip" penetrates the semantics of its components to render an engaging new form of description that challenges both our understanding and perception of it.

The term “super” infers a characteristic or value that surpasses what is understood as “normal.” After a brief etymological inquiry, however, one can observe that its counterpart, “crip,” evolves linguistically from the word “decrepit,” which comes from the Latin “de,” meaning “down,” and “crepitus,” meaning to “crack” or “break.” The resulting term generates an engaging semantic juxtaposition that represents, in a very valid manner, what it purports to be. “Supercrips,” following Berger (2008), are “those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible” (p. 648). Yet, the case of Oscar Pistorius becomes relevant to my discourse, and capable of being bestowed the status of ICEVORG, when he is perceived as “better” than his so-called “normal” peer athletes. The stigma of an abnormal body, which in the past would have most likely caused him pain and suffering, thanks to technology, pushed Pistorius into another stigma: a superman. Pistorius’s body was not human enough to compete with other “normal” bodies. The fact that “normal” athletes attempted to prevent Pistorius from participating in the Olympics represents the first of two pricks, or punctures, in the ethereal identity that the Olympian had created for himself. As Howe (2011) explains, Pistorius’s participation in the Olympics opened the debate to what Haraway (1991) once presented as a theoretical chimera. In Howe’s words:

> It appears that in Paralympic track and field athletics the closer a body is to a cyborg the more capital it holds, which is the opposite to the world articulated by Haraway (1991) in relation to the boundaries between humans and non-

> humans… Butryn see the nexus between the natural and legal and the artificial and illegal as hegemonic humanness (2003:28). Hegemonic humanism can be seen to have been practiced when Oscar Pistorius was initially excluded from competing in able-bodied athletics (Howe, 2008). His right to compete on his prostheses was restored because he has no other option but to run on man-made legs and by the fact they were not advantaging in the context of competition. In a sense, Paralympic sports celebrates 'transgressing the taboo boundary between blood, sweat, and tears, and blood, sweat and gears' (Butryn, 2003, p. 28). (p. 878)

In addition, according to Beil (2009), Weyand et al. (2010) published an analysis of Pistorius's running ability in *The Journal of Applied Physiology*, where the researchers reported that "his mechanics differed from human legs" (p. 29). In addition, Beil explains:

> Peter Weyand has studied whether sprinter Oscar Pistorius' artificial limbs confer a biomechanical advantage. Weyand's team reported that Pistorius hits with less force and spends longer with each "foot" on the ground that runners with intact legs. The paper did not directly assess performance advantages. But in an article in press in the same journal, Weyand and Matthew Bundle of the University of Wyoming release their conclusion: Pistorius has an edge over other runners. He can reposition his lightweight legs more rapidly than any sprinter ever measured, including Usain Bolt. In addition, Pistorius doesn't have to push as hard to produce the same force, much like a bicycle rider can switch to a lower gear and pedal less without losing speed. Other members of the investigation team however, maintain that Pistorius does not

gain an advantage from his artificial limbs. (p. 29)

The punctum that I argue in favor of pushes itself forward with what would come next for Pistorius. After Pistorius's name made its way into the worldwide news, and began its viral spread to inhabit cyberspace as the "Blade Runner" (Hunt-Grubbe, 2007), a tragic event occurred. Pistorius found himself being tried for the murder of his then girlfriend, model Reeva Steenkamp. He allegedly shot her three times at his South African home early Valentine's Day morning. The innumerable reports released to the public by the South African press suggest that he may have been enraged as a result of illegal performance-enhancing steroids. However, to this day, Pistorius's motives for shooting his girlfriend remain unknown.


Figure 21: Pistorius Cyborg. Pistorius running in the Olympic Stadium during the heats of the 400 metres at the 2012 Summer Olympics on 4 August. Image by Jim Thurston. Wikicommons.

Aside from the minute details of the case circulating cyberspace on a regular basis, what I find interesting is the act of disappearance (Baudrillard, 1992) Pistorius is subject to, and the impossibility of achieving it. When one visits his official site, all the links lead to the same message that reads, "Not Found. The requested URL /category/media-articles/was not found on this server. Apache Server at oscarpistorius.com Port 800." Upon further investigation, an official message can be reached. The message presents us with the following text:

> 14 February 2014
>
> No Words can adequately capture my feelings about the devastating accident that has caused such heartache for everyone who truly loved – and continues to love Reeva. The pain and sadness – especially for Reeva's parents, family and friends consumes me with sorrow.
>
> The loss of Reeva and the complete trauma of that day, I will carry with me for the rest of my life.
>
> - Oscar

The message Pistorius sends to the world meets another criteria of the ICEVORG. His attempt to disappear, and his actual act of disappearance from cyberspace, elevates the man-machine to a status far beyond the reach of a "normal" human being. His attempt to conceal a body—and I am not talking about his girlfriend's body, but his very own—is what makes him relevant and interesting. It is his attempted act of disappearance (Baudrillard, 2009) that assists his ICEVORG in its endless replications and expansions within cyberspace. A simple Google search for the term "Pistorius" results in 10,800,000

connections, even while the man himself was living in jail. The same search term, "Pistorius," when entered into academic search engines, returns 4,483 references from databases, scholarly articles, and citations. Thus, Pistorius's act of disappearance is an impossible task to achieve. He may no longer die. In Baudrillard's (2009) words:

> Let us speak, then, of the world from which human beings have disappeared. It's a question of disappearance, not exhaustion, extinction or extermination. The exhaustion of resources, the extinction of species – these are physical processes or natural phenomena. And that's the whole difference. The human species is doubtless the only one to have invented a specific mode of disappearance that has nothing to do with nature's law. Perhaps even an art of disappearance. (p. 24)

As it pertains to the application of Baudrillard's words to the specific case of Pistorius, I believe that his case represents the art of disappearance through infinite repetition and transgression of boundaries. Pistorius as ICEVORG has transgressed many boundaries, including boundaries of his own, as a "supercrip" (Howe, 2011), as well as the boundaries assigned to him by the others (media, popular culture, science, Academia, etc.). The Pistorius-ICEVORG is then expressed and represented as a combination of disciplines ranging from design (via his limbs) to media communication (via his website), in addition to the ramifications that have been produced by his actions and emotions. His status as ICEVORG is reinforced by the fact that his creation surpassed his limitations as a physical being. Oscar Pistorius made a monster of himself, one which he cannot control any longer. In the same fashion that Shelley's (1818) Frankenstein runs to the eternal ice just to find his own death, Pistorius is chasing not one but many ghosts contained in a single complex

entity I call the ICEVORG.

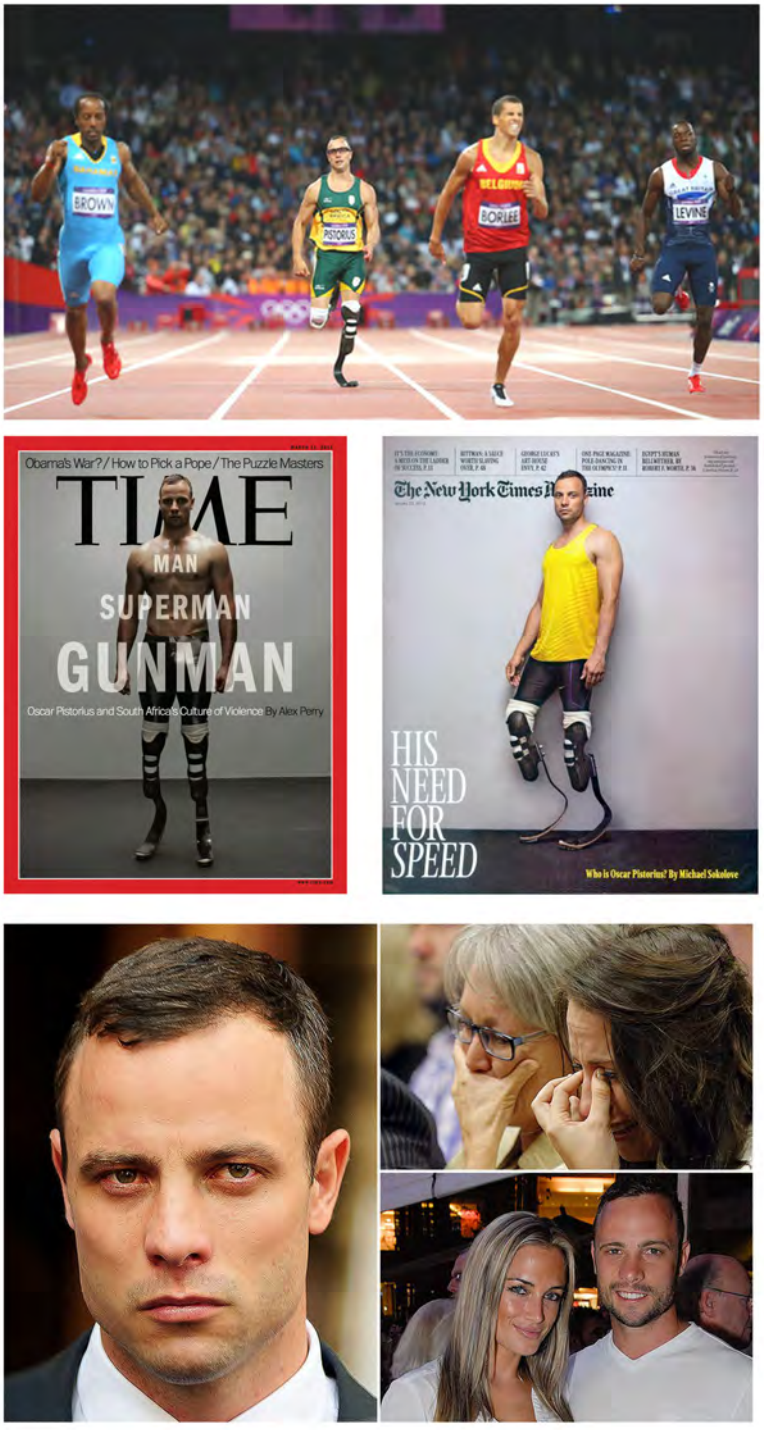



Figure 22: Pistorius ICEVORG. Collection of images grabbed from the thousands of pictures available online on the subject of "Pistorious".

Figure 23: BRIDE. Image by Orlan, 1947-
Official Portrait with a Bride of Frankenstein Wig, 1990, photograph, aluminium, 50 x 39 in. Artstor accessed October 2015

**ICEVORG B: Orlan**

When Baudrillard (1993) talks about disappearance, he describes the tension that presents itself when we attempt to "cultivate our bodies, our 'looks'…and desires" (p. 55). As Baudrillard writes,

> [h]e who lives by the same will die by the same. The impossibility of exchange, of reciprocity, of alterity secretes that other invisible, elusive alterity, that absolute Other, the virus, itself made up of simple elements and of recurrence to infinity. (p. 2)

Our endless attempts to control the way we construct our identity, in turn, create a tension that is constantly fleeing from us. We are constantly searching for ways to alter our identity. We search to prevent the feelings of incarceration that life conjures in our hearts as soon as we realize that life is a finite experience, as well as an abstract thought. As I

demonstrated in the preceding chapters, it is only when we become aware of the surface of Narcissus's pond that we are able to claim—to a certain extent—the ownership of our constructed image.

However, to control the reflected image is a daunting task, given the illusory nature of it, and our lack of control over the medium and its liquid nature. Yet, as we realize that we are nothing but another medium, or as McLuhan (1964) claims that "the content of any medium is always another medium" (p. 8), we may begin to entertain the idea that controlling our bodies (as medium) is a valid form of exploring the Self. We are told by many organized institutions, including church, state, and educational systems, that our bodies are containers of knowledge and wisdom; even the Catholic God himself inhabits our body and refers to it metaphorically as a temple. We decide to take control of said medium, and in understanding it as such, the narrative of what constitutes the Self varies along with the elements that construct it. By gaining control of the container, we may be able to become the agent between medium and message, and, more importantly, we may control what circulates in them, by them, and through them. Through the awareness gained by education and experience, we could even develop a sense of control over our own destiny, as well as our presence and/or absence in any given space and time.

We may even be capable of deconstructing the Self, and by means of analysis, transgress our own limitations. We can aspire to become ICEVORGS and transcend—avoid even—the unavoidable, which is the erasure that time will perform on each and every one of us, as mortal and finite beings made of heartbeats, thoughts, and decaying flesh and bone. As ICEVORGs, we become transparent beings living in the era of

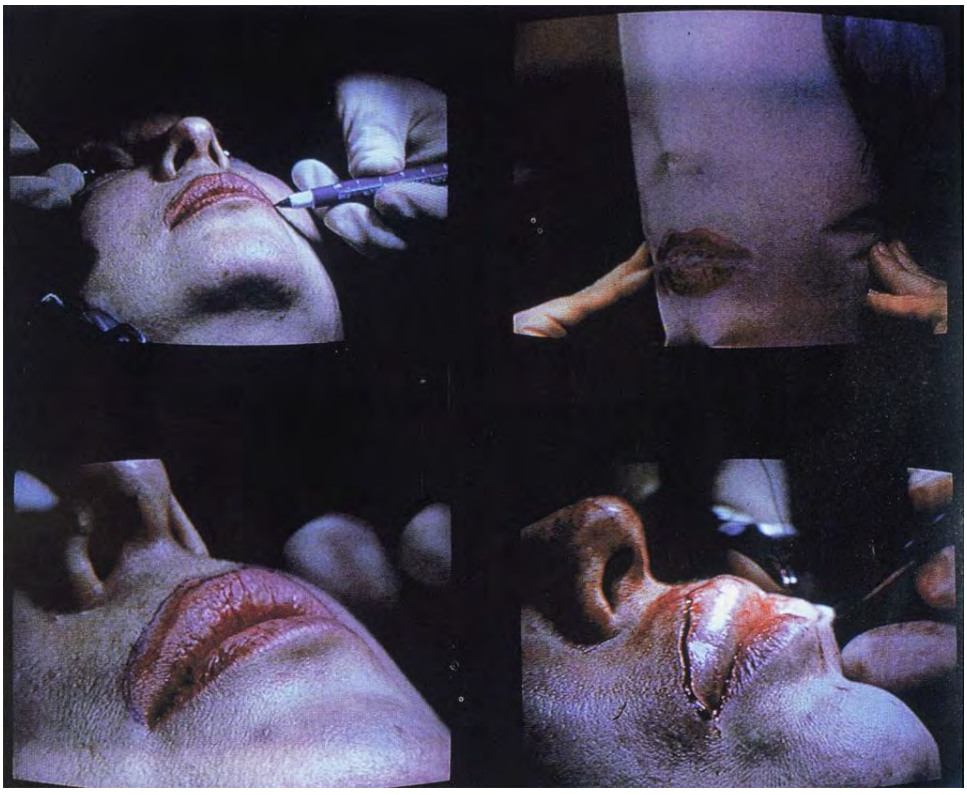
electronic blood, living in the "era of transparency [where] plastic surgery becomes universal. And the surgery performed on the face and the body is merely the symptom of a more radical surgery: that performed on otherness and destiny" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 55). In other words, by attempting to control our own body, both internally and externally, we let our desires go wild in an attempt to feel free from the constraints imposed by nature. In doing so, one will (without possibly meaning to) become an ICEVORG, as its very nature incorporates the electronic soul, or punctum, that allows for transgression among realities as facilitated—theoretically—by the "strange loop," or "tangled hierarchies" (Hofstadter, 1980, p. 21).

One of the most relevant case studies that I have found to demonstrate the validity of the conceptual monster that I call ICEVORG is the life and work of a French postmodern artist. Born "Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte" in 1947, this artist later adopted the name "Orlan." Orlan is a scholar in residence at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles whose artwork is described by McKoy (2009) in these terms:

> French artist Orlan undergoes a recurring self-directed surgical transformation of her appearance. Her work, which she refers to as Carnal Art ("Intervention" 318), embodies resistance to the ways in which femininity is produced by the male imaginary in the fine arts, in religious doctrine, and in the operating room. (p. 113)

Orlan's decision to make art that transgresses the boundaries of what society defines as art, beauty, acceptable, or even comprehensible is what makes her an apt embodiment of the ICEVORG, its various elements, and the relationships among them.

*La Reincarnation de Sainte-Orlan*. Creator: Orlan. Photographer Larry Qualls. Organized by Exit Art Fall 1996, Artstor Collection accessed October 2015



Mouth of Europa and the Figure of Venus: "a little while longer and you will see me no more…" Creator: Orlan. Video projections. Sydney Biennal, Data from University of California, San Diego. Artstor Slide collection accessed October 2015

Succesful Operation 2: Eyes. Creator: Orlan. Photograph. Exhibited at Gering & Lopez Gallery and Penine Hart Gallery, Winter 1995. Tryptich: mirror image photos with b/w. 33'x46', 30'x12', 33'x46'. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Larry Qualls archive. Artstor Slide collection accessed October 2015

[From the exhibition] "Omnipresence" Creator: Orlan. Sculpture and Installation, 1993. Exhibited at Gering & Lopez Gallery and Penine Hart Gallery, Fall 2004. Video monitor playing tape of seventh surgical operation at Sandra Gering Gallery, New York. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Larry Qualls archive. 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris . Artstor Slide collection accessed October 2015

"Omnipresence" Creator: Orlan. Sculpture and Installation, 1993. Exhibited at Gering & Lopez Gallery and Penine Hart Gallery, Winter 1995. 41st and final photograph of Orlan's transformation after 7th operation. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Larry Qualls archive. 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris . Artstor Slide collection accessed October 2015

"Orlan Visiting South Africa in 2012." (De Swardt, 2012)

Orlan's entire career is best described as "a series of rebirths and triumphs of will over technology" (Sumitra, 2013, para. 04). Her work has always been identified with boundary transgression as a means to shock audiences and challenge culturally ingrained notions of beauty and how it is constructed in today's world. With all the technology at our financial reach, it is surprising that we do not find more people jumping on the bandwagon of mediated beauty. According to Mckoy (2009), Orlan's continuous reference to her body as "obsolete" (p. 142) summarizes the framework for her art, and demonstrates the artist's conviction that boundaries between physical existence and what used to be considered a natural body have been dismantled through the mediation of science and medicine. McKoy claims that "Orlan's work anticipates a future in which 'bodies will become increasingly insignificant—nothing more than a 'costume' or 'vehicle' something to be changed in our search to 'become who we are'" (p. 113).

To demonstrate Orlan's status as ICEVORG, I only need to refer to her endless attempts to gain control over her identity. Her transgressive acts and performances illustrate her non-conformity to what has been given to her by default. I am not talking about accepting one's self-perceived ugliness, for one could easily observe that Orlan was a person that could be defined as attractive prior to the interventions she made to her own facial structure. In order to develop a strength and motivation to become the seed of an ICEVORG, one must experience—psychologically—some form of resistance against one's own body to push beyond the flesh, inwards or outwards. It has nothing to do with socially perceived beauty. As explained in chapter two, in search of betterment, people religiously attend the *Cathedral of Simulacra* to alter their bodies, and by doing so, they

subconsciously accept not only the finite nature of their being, but also their lack of conformity to the physicality of the mind's container. In other words, in spite of any possible "perfect" body, the *Cathedral of Simulacra* regulars do not accept themselves and their beauty as good enough. In fact, in their pursuit of beauty and perfection, some of them are even willing to take a step further into a cyborgian state of mind and ingest high-tech chemical compounds that will alter their bodies. In Orlan's case, her awareness of the expectations imposed by society, particularly by media and art, provide sufficient cause to push beyond what is described as "art" today. In constructing and presenting "Carnal Art," Orlan explores corporeal boundaries and identities.

Westley (2008) elaborates on how Orlan's project could be considered "abject art," a term coined by the Whitney Museum of Art to present works that revolve around the notions of repulsion and desire in the American imagination. Westley writes that the term "abject art" necessitates one's position in the art world and society as "the rebel that reconfirms the hegemonic order through its oppositional stance" (p. 189). She then asks, "To what extent does Orlan's project transgress binary distinctions and terms of symbolic difference, or in its horror-filled content, merely offer provocation that allows the viewer to walk away, reassured and reconfirmed in their coherent subjecthood?" (p. 189).

By calling her work "Carnal Art," and situating it in the tradition of self-portraiture, Orlan critiques the domain of self-representation, and how art aims to tackle the ever-growing tension accompanying identity construction in today's complex, technology-driven culture (Westley, 2008). In Westley's words:

Orlan's work, and its connotations with a sort of social sadomasochism and

> corporeal alteration, often uses violent imagery that elicits strong emotional and physical responses. Her use of plastic surgery both alludes to a cultural norm of feminine beauty (through its conventional associations and purpose) and transgresses it, by enacting rituals of pain on the body through cutting and dismemberment. (p. 190)

According to Westley (2008), Orlan's work has been associated with cyber-feminism because of its links to the technologies of plastic surgery. Her work has also been associated with cyber-feminism in that she creates her identity, and delivers it through several media, where she breaks free from the constraints of her physical existence to move beyond the notions of representation (avatar) or reinterpretation (cyborg), thus providing the most fertile soil to birth an ICEVORG.

In her project "La Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan," Orlan (1996) documents a series of nine surgical operations/performances, performed over a period of three years, with corresponding art installations. Eight of the performances have already been completed, but the ninth, in spite of the previous radical surgical interventions, may not be possible due to the ambition of Orlan's aims. Orlan's goal is to have her nose surgically enlarged as much as her bodily structure can physically support in order to reflect her reading of a Mayan mask. McKoy (2009) explains her attempt in these words:

> Medical technology hasn't quite caught up with Orlan, however, and to situate her surgical transformations as mere changes of costume is to trivialize the radical nature of the procedures. [I]t seems unlikely at this stage that the ninth operation, intended to give Orlan the nose of a 'pre-Columbian Mayan mask' (Faber 86) will

> ever take place. Since the beginning of *La Reincarnation*, Orlan has completely transformed her body through extensive liposuction, the reshaping of her eyes, lips, and nose, and implants in her chin, cheeks, and temples. Her new face is a composite of Western artworks: her chin taken from Botticelli's Venus, her lips from Moreaus's Europa, her eyes from an anonymous Fontainebleau portrait of Diana, the nose from Gerard's Psyche, and the forehead from Leonardo's Mona Lisa. (pp. 113-114)

It would be incorrect to approach Orlan's work from the perspective of what it looks like; rather, it should be approached from the perspective of what it means. By altering her physical body, she is expressing a desire to disappear into the works of art she has chosen as ideal references of beauty. She uses her transformation as a tool, a mechanism, a means to an end, to disrupt the establishment: "In fact, Orlan claims to be largely uninterested in the results of her surgeries; instead, her focus is on the surgical spectacle as it unfolds in the operating theatre, and on the ensuing public debate about the status of her modified body" (McKoy, 2009, p. 114).

With respect to Orlan's intention to construct a critical response to feminism through her art, Auslander (1997) finds a powerful voice for problematizing the relationship between Self and body, writing that Orlan's work "bring[s] her external appearance more in line with her inner sense of self by transforming a masculine appearance into a more feminine one" (p. 134). Orlan's desire, Auslander claims, is best summarized an interview she gave to *The Washington Post*:

> This is a meticulous attempt, little by little, to find a more fragile, reflexive, less

> sensual person. It's a transsexual operation—from woman to woman. I was always very timid, very tender, fragile. I was like that as a young girl. But when I wanted things in society I had to create an aggressive, hard personality. An external sensuality. [T]he idea is to find what I think is most deep, most elusive to me… A more vulnerable person, who allows herself to show that vulnerability, tenderness and timidity… it's not a question of putting on a mask, but taking one off… I think we can bring appearance around to reality. (Waxman, 1993, p. 9 as cited in Auslander, 1997, p.134)

For Auslander (1997), it is through her various transformations that Orlan attempts to craft a new identity free from the constraints of social norms. However, her new identity is never a finished entity; it is never fully established, but always deferred until the next operation. Orlan's work is about a lack of identity, and the malleable nature of her identity, or Self. It is through her work that we are able to reflect upon our very own selves, and how we react to the idea of taking control of our physical constructs in the pursuit of a new identity that is, for once, one we control in a more sophisticated and technocratic way. Auslander (1997) explains that Orlan "has said that when the surgical project is complete, she will hire a public relations firm to choose a new name for her and work within the French legal system to have her new name and face legally accepted as her identity" (p. 136). It is very important to understand that the operating table becomes integral to the construction of an ICEVORG. The body must be invaded, conquered, and transformed, so it can reach the status of Haraway's cyborg. By acquiring a "new," temporary body, one opens the passage between realities, the strange loop enters, and thus the ICEVORG is able

to move freely through conceptual dimensions and grow through viral expansion. At a perhaps subconscious level, one must perceive one's own body as nothing but meat, product, matter, capable of transformation at will. In Baudrillard's (2002) words:

> It is because the body of the cow has become a non-body, a meat-machine, that the viruses lay hold of it. It is because our human bodies have become non-bodies – neuronal, operational machines – that they have lost their immunity and the viruses are laying hold of them. And it is also because computing has become purely a matter of media technology that it has become vulnerable to all viruses of information. All viruses are in league: from the prion which infects the cow to the cow which infects man, and to man who infects the whole planet (to the point of infiltrating himself in to his own genetic code to modify). (p. 172)

As I see it, Baudrillard's words reflect the same inner intention in Orlan's artwork: the intention to become a virus that infects the whole fabric of reality. In the same manner that an iconic work of art influences (a term derived from influenza) culture as a whole, when an ICEVORG creates art and becomes art in return, the end result is capable of virulent infection through all possible media. The ICEVORG's ultimate goal is to inhabit in, and spread through, media. When artwork has been transformed into hypertext, it becomes an optimal mechanism for viral expansion. The idea then becomes Baudrillard's prion, which will become the seed that will move from body to body, from mind to mind, until the infection is so intense and deep that nothing can be done to avoid its existence.

The computational component required by an ICEVORG to grow is found here. Orlan's work is an ideal candidate for ICEVORG status inasmuch as it transcends itself as

body, as matter, and becomes the idea that moves through realities by means of boundary transgression. I must add that due to its nature, the ICEVORG must be understood as a liquid acronym. By this term, I mean that no letter of the acronym represents a single concept, but instead a multiplicity of them. I, as explained before, stands for Self, eye, intertextuality, interconnectivity, immersion, introspection, etc., whereas C represents computational, calculation, creation, critical inquiry, even the coldness that allows ice its volumetric dimension. Ultimately, though, the C in cyborg should represent the ICEVORG's status as conceptual creature. Another very important component of any ICEVORG is Barthes's punctum. This particular component may be the most difficult entity to observe and pin down for analysis. As I search for a punctum in Orlan's work and her persona as artwork, I cannot help but connect them to the text that has served as point of departure for this project, as well as my very own construction of Self throughout my doctoral candidacy years: Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein*.

Francis Bacon is credited as saying, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." I have found Shelley's text to be one of those digestible books that Bacon describes. Not only are the characters of the story captivating and exciting, but the story itself contains a narrative capable of spawning hundreds—if not thousands—of intertextualities. As a result, Shelley's plot became—without intending to do so—an uncontrollable monster itself. Her keen observations allowed her text to become an intertextual interpretation of the historical moments taking place in 1818. This intertextuality was then picked up by emerging new media such as film-making. One of the very early reinterpretations of Shelley's work was in 1910, with

the first motion picture adaption of Shelley's novel. The film's writer and director, J. Searle Dawaley, reinterpreted the original plot, and reduced it to just15 minutes of silent film. Technological constraints forced artists like Dawley to extract and compact the entire plot to adapt to what technology was capable of delivering in those times. It could be argued that the decision to step away from the original text to adapt to technology nurtured the emergence of intertextuality. It is important to note the outstanding achievements in terms of special effects that this movie delivers. Additionally, in terms of conceptual development, this movie makes a powerful statement in the scene that shows a monster that, in a purely Lacanian way, discovers its image reflected in the mirror and reacts in awe and complete fear of it. The monster's realization, therefore, demonstrates true transcendental discovery of consciousness. The monster reacts with disgust to its own bodily distortion as a result of his human "creators."

I argue that Orlan does exactly the same when she sees herself in the reflections she creates in different media, including those reflections she creates through her performances, and those she delivers to the world via satellite. It is the punctum that allows her work to cross from media to media. The puncture in Orlan's work resides in the fact that the viewer cannot and will not ever be able to pin down which representation is the artwork, and/or if there is one at all. As monster and creator, Orlan presents in her work a critical response not only to her body, but also to technology with respect to its insatiable hunger for self-awareness. At the same time, her work also summarizes the emotion of the times, emotions that engulf a human race incapable of realizing the full impact of the machines we bring to life, and how they flood society with dependence and needs unheard

of before. I find Orlan's work fascinating inasmuch as she becomes a fully developed metaphor for Mary Shelley's novel. Orlan as medium continues to release new versions of the same story, surgery after surgery, where the medium (as message) evolves in the same fashion that the story of Frankenstein evolved over time as it was developed by several authors.

It took more than two decades for the world to see a new interpretation of *Frankenstein*. This new interpretation would be, however, transcendental in what sense? in the construction of global popular culture. In 1931, James Whale produced a movie that would change popular culture and reality forever. Whale's work introduced a new monster to the screen—a monster of giant stature, thanks to industrial work boots "enhanced" by platforms to increase the monster's height. This new monster was not only of intimidating stature, but, more importantly, of green skin. The monster's skin color is a very interesting decision that may seem innocuous and theatrical. However, considering that the film is in black and white, the green color speaks volumes about the meaningful decisions made to attract the attention of the audience of the time, as it became an element meant to transgress boundaries at the conceptual level. What I mean by this is that the promotional material made public outside the theaters helped to construct the story before people would enter the movies. What they "saw" on screen was a green monster. Orlan's work, on the other hand, uses color to enhance the drama of her proposed art. Blood becomes both means and end, as its redness and fluidity carries the shock value necessary to procure a Strange Loop, both literally and metaphorically. One could argue that Whale's film was also speaking to the fear of the unknown, the fear of technology, electricity, and resources

in but a few hands. At the same time, technology had progressed to a point where new machines were being introduced to the market with prices intended to reach larger audiences. Such is the case of the photographic camera and the early version of film cameras. Toolan (2001) suggests a form of dialogue between brains and machines anchored to a particular setting that allows for the creation of a monster more rational and intellectual than his maker. Here, we can observe yet another metaphor for the human dilemma: the creature who questions its creator to the point of denying its life source. A hybrid between fiction and nonfiction allows the myth-making process to thrive and inform the public about how to construct reality. However, intertextual reading allows an even more important development: expressive and experimental reinterpretations. The results, far from being independent, claim individuality and a voice of their own. In the case of *Frankenstein*, the reinterpreted work slowly took over and became more important than the original source.

However, it is important to note that the most remarkable aspect of this reinterpreted narrative is twofold. First, the moment of creation introduced the concept of lightning as the means to inject life in inert body parts sewn together. This new idea changed Shelley's (1818) concept of life-making from one of chemistry to one of physics. This seemingly benign switch was of great symbolic importance, considering that Dr. Frankenstein's attempt to create life was based on his ability to manipulate chemical compounds. Therefore, Dr. Frankenstein attempted to control nature (and hence god) through intellectual knowledge, through the command of physics, in order to create life, and, ultimately, mimic god. Second, the negotiation between narratives is a key component

of this silent dialogue between media. Whereas Shelley's text spoke to the fear of technology and the machine embodied in a hybrid being, Whale's (1931) "text" speaks to society's fears about societal labeling, a general lack of communication, and solitude in a new society where people are being packed into isolated tribes incapable of direct communication. Whale's Frankenstein was never intellectual but a pure monster from the very beginning. His ultimate demonstration of some human consciousness was expressed through two basic human emotions: love and hate.

Whale (1931) constructed the film's character by transforming the monster from a noble, nameless, and intellectually gifted person (as it was constructed by Shelley) into a growling, hideous, and intellectually impeded being. Frankenstein is now a new form of the human-machine grotesque. The creature represents a new society perplexed by excessive "technification," and the acceleration of everything. This transformation gives birth to the contemporary iconic character that abounds in Halloween commemorations, cartoons, toy stores, and costume parties all over the world. In this version of the story, the moment of creation depicts a not-so-mad scientist harnessing the power of nature to give birth to his creation. The process in this version is conducted with the assistance of "Fritz," his loyal servant, and an audience of important people. The observers of this moment are trapped between two worlds: one of fiction, triggered by the creature and all the equipment constructing the scenario, and another involving the people observing the event who represent society and all that is considered normal, formal, and legal. The famous phrase "It's alive, it's alive" epitomizes the moment of creation, and it provides the structure for the plot of the story and its coda. More importantly, Whale's character solidly constructed,

in terms of popular culture, an icon that would take several years to be fully implemented in society at large, but, nonetheless, successfully accomplished its task. When the original story moved through different media, it evolved into different forms, creating a concert of intertextuality that aids in the creation of the endless commercial representations still prevalent today. However, it could be argued that most of these products were based on the Boris Karloff's (1931) portrayal of Frankenstein. To a certain extent, Karloff's acting becomes an emotion that transgresses boundaries to transform the original text. His acting, or any acting for that matter, reminds me of an old-time observation of mine about how we, as society, exalt actors for their ability to fool us into believing what they are not. That is the nature of the reality we have been living ever since cinema became integral to the fabric of culture. We pay to be fooled by actors, and we love it. By accepting their acts as real, we agree to the terms of simulacra in the same way that a kid walks out of the cinema completely convinced of his ninja skills after watching a movie on the subject.

In her transgressive performances, I argue that Orlan, as ICEVORG, becomes the creator, the monster, as well as the media where all events take place. Orlan is text as well; she is the point of departure from which her story is born. In searching for the puncture in Shelley's (1818) text, I have found it in a single paragraph written to describe the very moment when life enters the decaying, dead body of the assembled creature. The "seed" that created the evolving structure of the narrative, as well as the characters that have assumed so many forms of analog and digital existence, lies in the opening lines of chapter five of Shelley's novel. These six opening lines of text have suffered, just like Orlan, the most unimaginable transformation in order to become, what is today, the iconic image of a

tall, sometimes brutal, other times gentle, never human but always posthuman, creature. The paragraph that my analysis is founded upon is as follows:

> It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (p. 39)

The voice of the narrator for this particular paragraph encapsulating the intensity of the plot is described in first person narratorial voice. The paragraph is replete with symbolic terminology that creates contrasts to increase the symbolism and relevance of this particular section to the story. "Life" is opposed with "lifeless"; "spark" is opposed with "burnt out"; and "half-extinguished" is opposed with "breathed hard." These contrasts help create a sense of mystery and anxiety in the reader, which constructs a remarkable sense of accomplishment, in spite of itself. In other words, the text desperately seeks to generate—within the artificiality of fiction—the puncture required to bring the concept of Frankenstein to life. In addition, the above description of the narrator's environment summarizes the years of experimentation and learning described in the preceding paragraphs. However, it is not a storm but a sense of discomfort produced by the dying light of a candle that opposes electricity, alluding to the society's changing use of time, and a new form of life-light that was reserved for a few after the sun set.

As a sign of dawn (to create more tension with the candlelight), the creature opens an eye to reveal the culmination of enormous amounts of research and dedication. It is important to note that the creature opens one eye, not both eyes. This seemingly insignificant detail refers to technology as the spectacle of society, and photography as an emerging means to record "objective" historic events. The narrator then describes the infusion of life into the previously inert body. The extinguishing of the candlelight also refers to the dying technologies, which were making way for the new ones. The single opening eye, moreover, alludes to the control that machines began to hold over people. Machines made out of parts and pieces began to gradually take control over society, and the nameless monster exemplifies the impossibility of assigning one term to all of the machinery propagated throughout society. The collection of "instruments of life" is charged with meaning as it says almost too much without saying anything at all. The instruments of life could be anything from surgical instruments to machines, even bibles. The beauty of the structure of this paragraph relies precisely upon the symbolic flexibility in its semiotic construction. When Frankenstein describes the "lifeless thing," he points to it being at his feet. Such a description is crucial for creating the environment where this amazing event is to occur, as Frankenstein implies his emotional superiority over his creation. He is not constructing a scientific scenario surrounded by machines and "high-tech" equipment, and waiting for a lightning bolt to strike.

As an interesting note, 63 years after Whale's production, Kenneth Branagh directed a film described by its promotional title as *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, starring Robert De Niro. It claimed to be an adaptation of Shelley's original text. Even though

Branagh's work follows the novel more closely than other film adaptations, it deviates conceptually and literally from the original plot. However, the claim made in the promotional title is a clever marketing tool to attract people to the theaters. The moment of creation is evidently a re-interpretation of Whale's 1931 version. Using a generous budget, and incorporating Academy Award winner Robert De Niro as the monster, the analyzed scene begins with Frankenstein deciding to complete the creation process, in spite of the disease and decay around him. His childhood friend and bride-to-be comes to check upon him; she tries to bring him back to reason, and to take him away from the village struck by disease. However, Frankenstein is so obsessed with his work that he dismisses the strong feelings he has for her. The issue of gender plays into this: Frankenstein creates a male monster that will destroy his female friend. It is as if Frankenstein wants to free himself from the expectations of a traditional male to female relationship. The camera takes the audience into a close up of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous Vitruvian Man in order to underscore Frankenstein's credibility as a scientist. Additionally, this image is charged with meaning, as Da Vinci signifies excellence in interdisciplinary scholarship. By establishing this association, Frankenstein's attempt to make life, and transcend history, is perceived as acceptable, and possibly as a deed deserving all attention and public interest. His creation is expected to be the perfect marriage between art and science. Frankenstein's character, in conjunction with the setting, prepares the audience for the moment of creation, the coda of this scene. To finalize the construction of this moment, a very interesting scene is put together. In this scene, we can observe Frankenstein writing in his scholarly journal about the events. In the background, a dead body hangs from the ceiling

by chains, naked, vulnerable, apparently dead, therefore releasing Frankenstein from any harm. The great advantage of scholarly research would had been accomplished had the movie ended here, but this scene is only the interpretation of a single paragraph of text that evolves into a wealth of content. The film then progresses the story, narrating more and more events. These events are sometimes close to the original text, but, most of the time, they are reinterpretations constructed to suit the entertainment of the masses. Even though there remain differences between the original text and Karloff's monster, and then Robert De Niro's, the intertexual exchange of information between every text demonstrates how new media technologies are making the emergence of new forms of life possible. "Whose text is the original?" we may ask ourselves. Is it Mary Shelley's text? Is it Boris Karloff's interpretation? When does De Niro's interpretation become a text? Promoted by the emerging power of mass media communication and entertainment, I think Karloff's Frankenstein surpassed Shelley's text. What is important, nonetheless, is that the fear of technology prevails. The act of creating life continues to be a human predicament that spawns all forms of Frankensteins across media. Innumerable forms of nameless monsters will emerge, evolve, and, ultimately, really live. The famous expression "It's alive, it's alive" will soon become an open source code, or the name of a software that simulates life, reality, and, eventually, human consciousness.

Yet, even more important is how this analysis relates to Orlan's work, and how such a comparison informs and validates the status of ICEVORG that I argue is present in Orlan as a living, breathing, post-cyborgian construct. The sought-after punctum that ignites life in Orlan's work is observable in the repulsion and disbelief her artwork creates

in her audiences. Providing a source of doubt about what is real and what is fiction establishes the punctum necessary to declare "It's alive, it's alive!" with respect to Orlan as an ICEVORG.

The effects that Orlan as ICEVORG has upon society are numerous and observable. Orlan's work provides a sense of female empowerment that quickly moves the discussion about the dangers inherent in cultural media to a place where what we consume as live performance is in fact nothing but "mediated performance," where audiences exercise "considerable discretion in how they use and interpret the texts offered to them" (Auslander, 2009, p. 151). As Auslander concludes, "mediation does not in itself determine the 'meaning' of the mediated text" (p. 151).

However, to establish a connection between the moment of creation in Shelley's (1818) artwork and the creature in Orlan's intertextual construct, I cannot avoid pointing out that regardless of whether we are discussing reality or fiction, we are ultimately talking about desire and pleasure as the ultimate goals both creatures so desperately seek to obtain. In both performances, I can find any ICEVORG's reasoning for existing: to incite emotion. In analyzing Orlan as both creator and monster, the emotions expressed via her work assume the form of desire and pleasure, and assist in the construction and birth of an ICEVORG. In both Shelley and Orlan pleasure is also associated with pain, destruction. Both pleasure and desire entail a form of glue that, at once, keeps them apart and fuses them into a single semiotic cell; this glue is seduction.

As Baudrillard (1990) says, seduction "represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe" (p. 8). It is precisely

through seduction that an ICEVORG manages to move from reality to reality, from medium to medium, from text to hypertext, to keep our attention active and our imagination blooming. ICEVORGs are meant to transgress ontologies, and seduction is a valid and reliable way to do it; seduction is also one way to differentiate an ICEVORG from a cyborg. ICEVORGs have the capacity to dismantle any reality by questioning it. They are able to transform from chameleons to peacocks, as long as the goal of transgression is attained. ICEVORGS are masters of appearances. In Baudrillard's (1990) words:

> The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand. The ability to turn appearances in on themselves, to play on the body's appearance, rather than with the depths of desire. (p. 8)

In the particular case of Orlan, I want to finalize my case study by analyzing her 1993 sculpture and installation entitled "Omnipresence," which was exhibited at Gering & Lopez Gallery and Penine Hart Gallery in the winter of 1995. The figure below is a photograph taken by Larry Qualls, and was extracted from the scholarly image database Artstor. In this image, the artist is presented as a piece of art, a sculpture, a lifeless object that has been captured to be observed, not as an image, but as evidence of a physical presence in a gallery space. That seemingly unimportant fact reveals the nature of Orlan as ICEVORG. Her declaration that she is the sculpture is one that transgresses ontologies through the use of an adapted form of metalepsis, which is applied not to text but to

hypertext.The living and breathing sculpture poses for the camera with a distant gaze. Those eyes are the embodiment of Frankenstein's fiend; dead yet alive, they are motionless, yet will not stop looking back at me. They are sterile and cry tearlessly in grief as she shouts her frustration to become a fully formed work of art (figure 22).

Her eyes are as artificial as the plastic cheekbones inserted in her forehead that aspire to become horns. As Barthes (1981) would say, "I cannot transform my grief, I cannot let my gaze drift, no culture will help me utter this suffering which I experience entirely on the level of the image's finitude" (p. 90). Her pain becomes mine—her need to transcend her own body, mine as well. The cyan background enhances the yellowish color of her skin, or is it the photograph's skin? I am several levels removed from the possibility of experiencing the artwork with all my senses. The title of her work does a fair job in classifying her, her work, as ICEVORG, for she is not there but everywhere. The word Orlan chose to describe her work ("omnipresence") is an observation of language and its consequences. As Westly (2008) notes,

> [T]he word in thought and the spoken word are but distantly related. In an organic metaphor, the word is compared to a seed… [t]he power of language is not to be underestimated, in public it even presents a danger as it transforms itself, takes on manifold meanings, exercises untold influence and operates as in a game of Chinese whispers, where the final word has no bearing on its original intended meaning. (p. 152)

"Orlan is not her name. Her face is not her face. Soon her body will not be her body (Rose, 1993, p. 82). The image is neither the artwork nor is it the title; her "cyborged" body is not

it either. The construct as a whole is it. Yet, more importantly, even and in spite of their invisibility to our eyes, the spaces between elements are the backbone and embodiment of Orlan as ICEVORG.

## Conclusions

In summarizing what has been done and said, I must add that I began writing in the bliss of ignorance, sharing my personal life and how I became a cyborg myself. The proem, or introduction, to the dissertation aimed to validate autoethnography as a form a scholarly writing—a method and style that slowly and progressively disappeared as chapters kept blooming. Even though my text turned out to be a hybrid form of writing, probably acceptable only within the experimental and interdisciplinary MATX program, I came to believe that autoethnography must be further explored in all fields of doctoral research, as it brings the human back into the development of knowledge. I find this particularly important today, when the debate of computers and the evolution of artificial intelligence is only the tip of the iceberg of what the future may hold. To be individuals and to have a unique perspective on life is what renders the contribution of doctoral research relevant, regardless of the mind-blowing achievements of electronic technology. Error will keep us human, and the capacity to make mistakes is what prevents the apocalyptic future that media present us with on a daily basis. Autoethnography provides authority to the personal voice, with all the faults and unexpected glitches that make us human.

Chapter one is about self-discovery. I am not referring to the person, but to the potential doctoral scholar. It is an acknowledgement that I found myself standing in the unknown, and that anything and everything could be subject to scholarly investigation. Through my investigations, I was able to understand the fragility of life, reality,

perception, and the thin membrane that separates scholars from the general public. Still unsure as to which side I belonged to, I enjoyed the process of learning the mechanics of scholarly writing, which I am far from mastering. By presenting a comparative approach, I realized that the path I chose to walk began to make sense inasmuch as the capacity for philosophical thought had germinated in my head. The dissertation in the field of humanities, I realized, was not about describing life to the minute detail of science, but about sharing my unique philosophical vision of the vicissitudes of lived experience.

I could not help but visit the words of philosophers of stature, such as Descartes, Heidegger, Husserl, Baudrillard, Derrida, and Barthes only to experience a sense of despair and impotence never felt before. In pure honesty, I wanted to become Count Dracula in order to have eternity to learn, and, probably, just probably, understand and master these philosopher's thoughts, which have been encapsulated for an eternity in fragile, decaying words. However, internalizing some seeds of their thought here and there allowed me the possibility to break free from literal thinking and fly into the realm of philosophical thought. Said liberation took place on the sidewalks of The Fan, Richmond's historic neighborhood, when I discovered a thin, almost invisible, spider web, observable only with the help of sunlight or raindrops caught on their way to feed the soil. Observing what was previously invisible allowed me to find the door into my argument that would eventually became the evolving notion of the ICEVORG.

From the thin web that I found, equipped with a more philosophical view of daily life, and encouraged by my readings of Baudrillard and his hard-to-digest ideas, I discovered and built the conceptual framework that helped me construct the *Cathedral of*

*Simulacra*. Interestingly enough, I was caught not by the spider web, but by the seemingly empty space in between objects. In the same fashion that Neo from *The Matrix* is capable of perceiving the constituents of the matrix, I found myself describing the nuances of my observations. Filled with doubt about the certainty of my thoughts—and at that point, even my very own existence—I continued to incorporate arguments to feed my observations. However, frustration resurfaced and invaded my life, as I felt doubtful of all else. I was arguing that reality is no more; what else could I have I expected from my ponderings? Fooled, the monster within fled and years went by. Upon the return of my Self, I moved into the next phase, from presentation to representation to interpretation.

Chapter two tackles the idea of avatar, as I continued in my attempts to understand the spaces between elements. Inside the *Cathedral of Simulacra*, I realized that the distance between my physical body and its mirrored representation was a territory with no maps, a place where I could exist, but only through the mediation of an avatar. I then needed to understand what that concept was all about, so I immersed myself in research about said concept just to find myself, once again, the subject of my very own study. I played with my avatar on social media without hesitation or limit. One year, for instance, I decided to show to the world a digital representation of my likeness and the status of my emotion at that moment. One image per day non-stop, for 365 days, produced 365 self-portraits shared through Facebook. It was not about narcissism or ego. It was to learn not only about people's responses to the intimacy of a portrait aimed to present pure emotion as it is shared on a bursting viral social network, but, more intensely, about my own reaction to the construction of my avatar. That intellectual investigation helped me to understand the

relationship between image, emotion, and message, which would lead to the construction of the proposed conceptual creature that I later baptized as ICEVORG.

At that point in my life, I was working as a tenure-track assistant professor for Saint Olaf College in gelid Minnesota. With my divorce initiated and the dismantling of my family as a social construct in my head, I traveled to Europe for the first time. In chapter three, I continued with my philosophical observations and experiences. In chapter three, I go into detail about the emotions and feelings I experienced during my travels, and how I met God's avatar in a very peculiar way. The text constructed in chapter three attempts to share the mechanics of the brain from the inside out. The evolution of the texts and the scholarly investigations supporting my observations and claims were in preparation for a deeper analysis on existing theoretical creatures, specifically cyborgs. The next step in the development of my dissertation was to move the concept back into the body, so to speak, and I found the backbone of my proposed contribution in Haraway's words.

Chapter four is devoted to constructing a comparison among ontologies, concepts, and other ideas accepted at face value among theorists today. In other words, at this point, it is highly unlikely that a young scholar would propose the dismissal of the notion of cyborg, for instance. It was my interest as a professor of media culture, fine arts, and design, to put all learned and experienced theories into a melting pot and mix them well, just to see what would come out of it. My four years at Saint Olaf College, and the innumerable exercises conducted with students using Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the foundation for digital construction and new media arts, served me well in understanding where I was headed. It was not cyborgs or avatars that I was interested in. It was not

media, mass media, fine arts, or design in particular, but all of the above. I am a child of the MATX program, after all.

However, life happened. I quit my job at Saint Olaf College mainly because I could not find inner peace there. I got rid of all my earthly possessions, packed my life into two suitcases and flew south to the Andes. I needed mom.

Two years went by, as did many attempts to rebuild my life. I failed and failed and failed again, so many times, in fact, that I became good friends with failure. I was about to give up on taming my dissertation monster when life pushed me back into it. Once again, I got rid of all my possessions, except for two suitcases full of clothing, and flew back to Richmond. And with incredible reluctance and honest intellectual pain, I went to writing.

I birthed chapters five, six, and seven. My ADHD bliss provided the wings to fly into the unknown, one more time. Chapter five continues the comparison between cyborgs and avatars, while incorporating the role of media and textual mediation. In the process, this comparison leads to the construction of ICEVORG, and how posthumanism serves as the ideal supporting theory for the concept.

Chapter six focuses on the theoretical construction of ICEVORG, a conceptual creature inhabiting the interstices existing among disciplines, and what I see as my contribution to the fields of fine arts and cyber culture. I am aware that my proposed idea may be underdeveloped at this point, yet I am fully confident that it is a valid conceptual proposal. As knowledge continues to evolve, it demands new ideas. Whether the proposed ideas are good or bad, valid or decrepit, is beyond the control of scholars. I think it is time, though, that we move into a post-cyborgian era, as the subject matter is depleted already.

New ideas must emerge to add to the discourse, even if their existence only lasts as long as the blink of a flickering screen. Denial is another form of validation.

I think, therefore I ICEVORG.

Chapter seven, the last one, presents two case studies to demonstrate the application, implication, and implementation of the concept of ICEVORG in two fields: the first one I claim to be regular daily life, and the second is the peculiar field of contemporary fine arts. Both case studies served me well to present the proposed theory in action.

In closing my intellectual journey, I would like to add that I am heading to a land that has no map for me. I do not have a job or a place I could call home, but I will finally take the splinter out of my soul and live with my mind open to embrace my life as a posthuman being hoping to one day become an ICEVORG

To conclude, I found myself bathed in tears last night. The droplets, soon to become tears, kept sliding south, down my face, in martial obedience to gravity. I couldn't help it; it was happening. I released my hold on the edge of the precipice. It's been eight years already, almost nine since I was tricked by my Self into pursuing the doctoral path just to find myself drowning in stormy seas of alphabet soup. Learning to swim along the way, I managed to push my body and mind to write, and write, and then write some more. It is hard to believe that nearly a decade ago I wrote my very first paper ever. I opened it with a cautionary note warning of precisely that. Two years later, hundreds of anecdotes chose me as the protagonist of my fictive life. In spite of despising the term "journey" and what it entails, I cannot help but acknowledge that it has been a journey to arrive to this

particular peculiar reality. I lost my life as I knew it, and without meaning to, I became my own shadow. The disillusion and burden brought along by this experience became a splinter in my spirit. For eight years, I could not breathe without the daunting sensation that I was wasting my time by not writing the dissertation. At some point during the journey, I came to believe that I lost my family. I fooled myself into believing that "el PhD" was the ogre eating anything and everything that I touched. It ate my family, my life, my job(s), my reason to live, even my reason to die. I became numb and dissociated from reality. At some point, though, I became the subject of my own research interest. Now I understand that I had to be that way. I identified with Frankenstein and his monster, and I became alive and dead, angry and peaceful, frustrated and hopeful. I hatched into a bird that couldn't fly, then into a black and white butterfly. I am a chameleon dreaming to become a dragon, and the dragon dreaming to become a dragonfly. I am here. I am now. I am done.

"It is always the same:

once you are liberated,

you are forced to ask

who you are"

Baudrillard

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# APPENDIX A

## [Regrets]

**by Guido Alvarez**

Her mother burst into tears. Her deep blue eyes, plowed by time, revealed to the globe her righteous suffering in surrealist high definition. She was drained, crushed, perplexed. Amelia was her only baby after all, she was fifteen when her brain flew away and the coma parasite spread across her youthfulness. The pristine fabric of her young body remained horizontal, frozen, and intact. Thriving silently day after day, night after night. After a few years her bosom bloomed while she became silent desire of all those flourishing ratings who followed her thru the glare, day after day, night after night.

For three years Amelia lingered peacefully, crippled under the biased glimmering of the lonely hospital neon light. The whole world twittered every detail of her immurement. The blogosphere throve almost a whole nine percent during the years the precise jury took to nurture the verdict, while the networks molded Amelia and her mother, mercilessly, into unexpected theatrical characters, bumper stickers, home-made picket signs, collectible pins, brand names, everlasting cheap perfume, Facebook support groups, email scams; and even the name of a mediocre rock band.

It was a warm and cozy afternoon in September when Mary, her best friend, walked into the hospital room with a tall and slim lawyer wearing Armani by her left side and the dreadful will, yes that incomprehensible repugnant penned manuscript on the other. Why? Why? Why? Her mother would never cease to cry her brain out. After that mournful visit her hopes turned into rage, pure rage against the system, law, and God. Why

would Amelia, her beautiful Amelia, fall in love with Poe's macabre tales so much, so passionately? She must have been confused. Amelia was so young and innocent. When did her infatuation begin? Why Poe and not Lewis Carroll? Why Poe and not Osho? Why that ravenous murderer and not text messaging as every other girl? Impossible!!! She would say gasping for air, every time she broke free from the recurrent nightmares haunting her nights.

Unfortunately, it was real. It was very real. She realized walking out the Supreme Court of Justice. Justice? She thought. The sentence was final. No appeal, no court could change the empowering fate. The supreme power of law sealed the written request and declared the trial as a triumph of the rights of the individual. The ultimate success of democracy and freedom concluded. Media was glad as could be and ready to release a new victim into the circle of sand.

That morning Amelia looked stunning, beautiful, and alive! Her white long gown shone radiant against the glitter of her favorite purple shoes. Ironically, her mother found a pair that exactly matched the detailed description on Amelia's will. All cameras loved her so much. Some cameramen stood still in disbelief as she was wheeled out of the church. For a brief moment the wind blew Amelia's hair and along with it the scattered clouds who wanted to see her. The overexposing star hastily appeared on top of the blue demanding hats, shades, and forcing wide open eyes into thin lines laying side by side with running noses in between. More than a million hands covered curious eyes of minors at home that skipped school to watch it happen -live! Then the wind stood and gazed accomplice of the immutable history before her. Quiet and Peaceful Amelia left her bed of flowers. Her mother clinched her fists tight while read streams of life escaped free to meet the soil yet she wouldn't notice.

It was written. It was ready.

Her mother's voice turned into a deep, long, and everlasting shriek that froze Billions for eternity.

With the entire universe as one witness…

Amelia was buried alive.

# APPENDIX B

Documentation of collected evidence during my trip through Italy, Germany, and France. January 2011. All the images captured by the author.

# APPENDIX C

## VITA

Guido Esteban Alvarez was born on August 26, 1971, in Cuenca Ecuador and is an American resident. He graduated from Colegio Hermano Miguel La Salle in 1989. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Design from Universidad del Azuay in Cuenca, Ecuador in 1994 and subsequently worked in Graphic Design for several years. He received a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communication and Design from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, in 2004 thanks to a Fulbright scholarship he was awarded with in Ecuador, his native country. He has been working as a university professor ever since. He received a Doctorate in Philosophy from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, in 2015. Guido Alvarez now resides in Minnesota.